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ERYRBYGGJA
SAGA

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS: LINCOLN & LONDON
AND THE AMERICAN-SCANDINAVIAN FOUNDATION
INTRODUCTION

To the modern reader the Old Icelandic “family sagas,” i.e., sagas dealing with the lives of Icelanders, unquestionably have an air of sameness. He carries away the general impression of bloody feuds, of many genealogies, of the Icelandic fondness for litigation; and negatively, of the small role erotic complications play in them. However, longer familiarity and closer study reveal that after all such generalizations are hardly warranted: in some, like Lasdæla saga, Kormáks saga, Gunnlaugs saga, erotic relations do play a predominant role; in some, as in the Gísla saga, legal proceedings are of minimal importance; in others there is little or no bloodshed or litigation. And we shall discover that, apart from the unmistakable “family likeness” produced by similar style and sameness of social background and attitudes, they are by no means cut over the same last; that, on the contrary, the diverse predilections and interests of the various authors confer distinct individuality on the respective sagas. Eyrbyggja saga is a case in point.

Walter Scott could not have made a better choice for his contribution to Blackwell’s well-known Illustrations of Northern Antiquities (1814) than the generous excerpts culled for it by him from Thorkelin’s Latin translation of Eyrbyggja saga (1787). For in no other saga is there found such a wealth of glimpses of the “antiquities”—that is, the beliefs, the folkways, the traditions and manners—of the Norsemen of the tenth and eleventh centuries, furnished by an author who, though writing centuries later, was deeply interested in the life of his ancestors—as so many of his countrymen were and still are, to a degree that is characteristic of the whole people. In fact, it is doubtful if any nation can match them in that respect, notwithstanding the manifold cosmopolitan, alien diversions and interests our age has imported into the once remote island. No wonder, therefore, that Eyrbyggja saga, strongly set off by this antiquarian interest, has been one of their favorites—even though it does not sound the heights and depths of humanity as does, e.g., the Njáls saga, the Gísla saga, the Lasdæla saga, and even though there is no con-
But to bide his time till he can strike the decisive blow, and then he is ruthless. He is a man of peace—when it suits his purposes; a peacemaker, not so much out of human kindness but because to be a successful mediator is a feather in his cap. Though not of commanding presence, a prime requisite for leadership in those rude days, he does not lack physical courage, and makes up for any lack of strength by his canniness and presence of mind. All in all, at least so far as our saga is concerned, not a man to admire, a shrewd politician and diplomat. In other sags, to be sure, he is of a larger stature. In the Njáls saga he is called "the wisest man in Iceland of those who had not the gift of prophecy." And it is Snorri who at two critical junctures played a decisive role in the history of the republic—once, when the question whether to adopt Christianity as the state religion threatened to disrupt the Althing; and again, when the suit over the burning of Njál almost led to civil war.

The criticism might be levelled at Eyrbyggja that—as is the case with most sags—there are too many personages introduced (and too many with similar names) for us to get acquainted with in a book of such moderate size. But such criticism would not take into account the conditions of the times and the place of its origin. For, as in other peoples at the agricultural stage of cultural development, the knowledge of genealogy—nay, the relish of it—forms a very essential portion of the total mental contents of the community. In the remoter rural districts, everywhere, people know far more people, and more about them, than do the average city dwellers, who may live next door to one another for years without knowing their neighbors by name, let alone their family history, habits, character. But if there are many personages in Eyrbyggja, yet a fair number of them are drawn with such skill and knowledge of human nature that we are not apt to forget them. The most memorable figure, no doubt, is the old cantankerous curmudgeon, Thórarín, an admirable study of senile avarice and general churlishness, contrasted with the upright, calm fair-dealing of his son, Arnel; whereas his daughter, Geirrid, plainly has inherited much of her father's bile. No wonder she is out of patience with her son, the somewhat phlegmatic, peace-loving Thórarin who is well-mated with the gentle, self-effacing Aud. With only a few deft touches the author neatly outlines the pleasure- and finery-loving Thurid, a regular courtsman type, a woman who betrays her husband without any compunction and can wheedle and wind him around her finger. To us she seems unworthy of the love of the knightly soldier of fortune, Bjorn. To her disadvantage we may contrast with her the desolate widow Thorgerd, sent from pillar to post and loyal

*Since writing this I have come to a different conclusion; viz., that there is reason to think that the arrangement of the various seemingly disconnected "episodes" is due to deliberate planning by the author. See Journal of English and Germanic Philology, April 1929.
carrying out barbarous advice to wring from Arnkel the promise to initiate suit against Snorri. Least satisfactory, because contradictory and vague, is the delineation of Thorgunn in the episode filled with macabre and grisly details which takes up a disproportionate amount of space in the saga but adds little to it.*

I have spoken of the author. As is the case with all Icelandic sagas the author of our saga is not known. Yet, as remarked before, he reveals his personality, his predilections and interests so clearly that it does not really matter whether we know his name. Still, they color his work so decisively, though perhaps not to its advantage as a narrative, that his authorship is of surpassing interest.

What manner of man was he? His work gives us many clues for our knowledge of him.

That he belonged to the upper class of society seems indicated by his scornfully humorous treatment of the dull, awkward, easily panicked slaves. He was clerically trained, of course; for how else, in that age, could he have received the training how to read and write—and he certainly had read a considerable number of manuscripts. Very likely he got this training at the Augustinian monastery located at his time on Helgafell. But in all probability he was not a clergyman himself: not only are there no pious reflections in his work, but Christianity in general evidently was not in the forefront of his thinking. It does not occur to him to have evil Thórólfr's ghost in its final hauntings "laid" by churchly exorcism, though the land was long christianized in the writer's time. The same is true of Thorgunn's spooking. She is, to be sure, put by in the Skálholt churchyard—"and when they [the pall bearers] came to Skálholt, the precious things which she had willed to the church were delivered there, and the priests gladly received it all" (and some malice might be detected in that remark) but when her Christian burial does not prevent her spooking, and when things at Fröða get out of hand, what with the hauntings of the drowned Thóródd and his company, the revenants are finally evicted by a sort of juridical procedure, after which, to be sure, the attending priest performs the appropriate Christian rites. Not a single priest is mentioned by name in the saga, not even who first officiated in the churches at Fröða and Helgafell, which would certainly not have been the case if the author had been in any way connected with the Church; though true to his antiquarian in-

*Though it somehow attracted Robert Louis Stevenson enough for him to base his tale of "The Waif Woman" on it (Scribner's, 1914, Vol. 56, pp. 687-701).
“they say,” and the like; and an intellectual honesty in judging motives which would do credit to a modern critical historian. All of which, of course, does not prevent him, in saga style (but also like historians of classical antiquity), from composing dialogues on occasions when the two interlocutors could not possibly be overheard by others—and they are always quick and pithy; nor from giving credence to the superstitious of his time.

The same qualities of mind are reflected in the author’s style, and there chiefly in his pronounced tendency to understatement. The figure of Liðes (understatement) is, to be sure, characteristic of saga style; but here it is carried almost to excess as when—to give but one example—the crew of the fleet sent out by King Harold to subdue the Western Islands on their return report to him “that they had not observed that Ketil [their admiral] was furthering the power of King Harold in those parts”; meaning of course the exact opposite.

Incidentally, few sagas throw such a clear light on the manner of their composition: at the desk, with manuscripts lying open before the author, who skilfully “pieces together” tidbits of local tradition and episodes from other sagas, weaving them into a historical context, and fortifying his narrative with verse handed down by word of mouth. Witness such bookish turns as “X, who will recur later in this saga” (which, note well, belongs to a different category from the frequent statement occurring in the literature that a certain person “now is out of the saga”), or “as was written above,” or “he occurs also frequently in other sagas than this one”—phrases which reveal that the author was able to leap forward and backward in his own manuscript.

As to the verse, it is thought that the practice of inserting it may have originated in the desire to lend color to, or else to bear out, the narrative of the saga by adorning the occasional verse of witnesses contemporary to the event or, still better, participants in it. Certainly the verse of the oldest sagas, such as that of Kormák, are unquestionably genuine, their style and emotional attitude matching that of the skalds speaking them, and their language showing the earmarks of antiquity, with the surrounding prose often merely a paraphrase or explanation of the verse, and contributing little, if anything, beyond it. Later, with the pattern once established, skalds would undertake to add verses of their own, based on the narrative; so that late sagas like the Njáls saga and Grettis saga have practically only “spurious” stanzas—as can be easily shown by their language and style—elaborating on the narrative but adding nothing to it.

Such is not the case in our saga, which has a considerable number of Skaldic stanzas. Most numerous (sixteen) are those attributed to Thórarin, who—quite believably—becomes a poet only when under severest emotional stress: a man of peace, he is goaded to fury when accused of thievery and reproached by his own mother as a coward for not immediately avenging the insult; and still more so when, after an indecisive skirmish, he discovers the severed hand of his wife Aud. But later, after he has slain his adversary, his mind is torn between exultation and regret. He feels revulsion over having shed blood but protests that it was done only under unbearable provocation. There is good, solid workmanship in Thórarin’s verses, though they hardly reveal any original poetic gift.

That, by all means, is the case with the seven vísur attributed to Bjorn Breidvikgr, all dealing with his infatuation with Snorri’s half sister, Thurid, wedded to a somewhat feckless husband. Like himself they evince an outgoing, exuberant, robust temperament and have lyrical quality of a high order. In fact, stanza 24—if properly interpreted—ranks high among erotic verse, a genre of which Old Icelandic literature has a not inconsiderable number.

There seems no good reason to question the genuineness of the two stanzas spoken by Thorúm Trefílsson. Of course, we may doubt whether all this verse actually was improvised, composed on the spur of the moment, as the saga alleges; just as even the layman may question the genuineness of the two stanzas attributed to the berserkers, considering they are Swedes who could hardly have mastered the poetic language of Norway-Iceland, and of those put in the mouth of the old servant woman gifted with second-sight; which does not necessarily mean that they are of poor quality, whoever did compose them.

It is difficult to come to a conclusion as to the date of composition of our saga. Some scholars place it as early as ca. 1200, which would make it one of the very first of the great sagas; others put it as late as the middle of the thirteenth century, depending chiefly on their evaluation of loans from Eyrbýggja by other sagas and whether we shall take at their face value the statements of the author that certain sagas were in existence at his writing—statements which are regarded by some scholars as later additions. But there is nothing to substantiate this hypercritical assumption. It is the feeling of this writer that these statements agree well with the conscientious attitude of the author on other matters, especially the scrupulous care with which he differentiates between what he has from local tradition—“some say,” “it was bruited about”—and what
from written sources. Consider also that all manuscripts, so far as they go, contain these statements.

It is certain that the saga must have been in existence not later than the middle of the thirteenth century because of indications in it that republican institutions were then still in force: the island was brought under the sway of the King of Norway shortly thereafter. Also, when we apply the criteria of diction and style we find, on the one hand, that the language is largely free from southern loans* and the style wholly untouched by the influences of medieval chivalry and romanticism so evident in Icelandic literature from the middle of the thirteenth century onward; on the other hand, that the style is far superior to that of demonstrably earlier sagas in elegance and incisiveness.

Summing up, we shall not be far wrong in concluding that our saga was composed during the thirties or forties of the thirteenth century.

We can never be grateful enough to the Icelandic scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who out of devotion for their native literary inheritance set themselves the task of copying the priceless manuscripts of the Arna-Magnússon collection. But for their selfless efforts, many of the finest sagas would have been irretrievably lost in the great conflagration of 1728 which destroyed the University of Copenhagen library. Thus the best version of the Eyrbyggja, which was contained in the manuscript codex of the fourteenth century called Vatnskynra, would have been lost (except for a few leaves) if it were not for the faithful copies made of it, one by Ásgeir Jónsson and the great collector, Arni Magnússon, himself; another by Ketill Jórunarson. Hardly less valuable, but unfortunately lacking all but the middle part of the saga, is a manuscript from the fourteenth century belonging to the Wolfenbüttel library. Besides there exist a number of fragments of a different version. The relation of these manuscripts to one another is set forth in the editions of Vigfússon (1864), Gering (1897), and Sveinsson (1935). The present translation is based on the Vatnskynna version as edited by Gering and Sveinsson. Previous to the present translation, the only one rendering the complete saga in English was the version (in volume II of their Saga Library) by that great poet, William Morris, aided by the Icelandic scholar, Eiríkur Magnússon (1892). It has admirable notes, but because of the unfortunate misconception—not dead yet—that the sagas require an antiquarian language flavored with English dialecticisms, is almost unreadable today.

*Though they are more numerous than the latest editor, Einar Ól. Sveinsson, would admit.

CHAPTER 1

Ketill Flatnose makes himself Lord of the Hebrides.

KETIL FLATNOSE WAS THE NAME of a noble lord in Norway. He was the son of Bjorn Buna, the son of Grim, a lord of Sogn. Ketil was married. His wife was Yngvild, the daughter of Ketil Wether, a chief-tain of Raumariki. Their sons were called Bjorn and Helgi; and their daughters were Aud the Profound, Thórunn Hynna, and Jórun the Sagacious. Ketil's son Bjorn was given in fosterage to be reared by Earl Kjallak of Jamtaland, who was a wise and excellent man. This earl had a son who was likewise called Bjorn and a daughter named Gjaflaug.

That was at the time when King Harold Fairhair came to power in Norway. Because of the hostilities [which ensued] many distinguished men abandoned their ancestral homes in Norway, some going eastward across the Keel [Mountains]* and others westward over the North Sea. Some of the latter passed the winter in the Hebrides or the Orkney Islands, but in the summer they went raiding in Norway and caused great damage in the realm of King Harold. The farmers complained of this to the king and asked him to rid them of this disturbance. Therefore, when King Harold decided to muster a fleet and send it westward over the North Sea, and he ordered Ketil Flatnose to head that force. Ketil sought to excuse himself, but the king stood on his going. So when Ketil saw that the king insisted on having his way, he got himself ready for the voyage; and he took with him his wife and those of his children who were at home.

When Ketil came to the western lands, he fought several battles and was always victorious. He made himself master of the Hebrides. Then he concluded a peace with the greatest chief-tains in the Western Isles.

*District around the Sogn Fjord in West Norway.

*The present Romerike, district in southeastern Norway.

*Jamtland, a province in western Sweden formerly belonging to Norway. The practice of having one's children reared by foster parents was common in Scandinavian antiquity.

*So named because they form the backbone of the Scandinavian peninsula.