

Translated from the Old Icelandic by PAUL SCHACH
Introduction and verse translations by LEE M. HOLLANDER

EYRBYGGJA SAGA



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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 generalizations, 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 *Laxdæla 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 *Laxdæla saga*, and even though there is no con-

tinuous, absorbing narrative as in these and other great works of Icelandic antiquity, and the whole is built up of loosely connected episodes—so much so, in fact, that one may call it the most episodic of the longer sagas.*

Certainly, although there is much first-rate story-telling in the saga, the modern reader misses the close-knit structure he expects in a good novel. There is no "plot" or unity in our sense. Rather, as we are told at the end, it is "the saga of the Thórsnessings, the people of Eyr, and those of the Alptafjord"; the chronicle, that is, of a countryside, the story of the inhabitants of the long, mountainous peninsula of Snæfellsness, of their settlement in the new country, their feuds about prestige and property during the first century of their settling there, centering more or less around certain dominant clans and personalities.

Among these, in the third generation, Snorri becomes the most prominent and thus might seem to represent what we moderns instinctively look for, a central figure or "hero." But, far more realistically minded than we, the men of old knew that, as the Eddic *Fáfnismál* put it,

When many are met
to match their strength,
't will be found that foremost is no one;

and in this respect the sagas, and our saga in particular, are more true to actual life and history than our novels in which the action is made to revolve around a "hero."

As to Snorri, the action of the saga by no means revolves around him. On the contrary, in the beginning at least, Arnkel is his equal if not his superior—a born leader who by virtue of his resourcefulness, his forthrightness, his fighting ability, and other chieftainly qualities wins the loyalty of many followers. He is laid low through overconfidence in his own prowess—when discretion would have been the better part of valor—and the witlessness of a slave. Only when this dangerous rival has been removed does Snorri win the undisputed leadership. It is in capable hands. As the story develops, our respect for him grows, though perhaps not our sympathy. He is a Fabius Cunctator rather than a Hotspur, one who has the strength of mind not to be goaded into half-measures

*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 1959.

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 sagas, 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 sagas—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, Thórólf, an admirable study of senile avarice and general churlishness, contrasted with the upright, calm fair-dealing of his son, Arnkel; 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 courtesan 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 loyally

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 Thorgunna 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 Thórólf'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 Thorgunna's spooking. She is, to be sure, put by in the Skálaholt churchyard—"and when they [the pall bearers] came to Skálaholt, 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 Fródá get out of hand, what with the hauntings of the drowned Thórodd 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 Fródá 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).

terests he notes soberly (or ironically?) that these churches were built by the chieftains because of the promise of the priests that as many could be accommodated in the Kingdom of Heaven as could find standing room in them, but that there were no priests as yet to perform the services in such as were built. And so far as the progenitors of the Thórsnessings are concerned, he shows no indignation at Bjorn Ketilsson who looks down with scorn on his kin in the Hebrides for having abandoned the faith of their forefathers.

Certain it is that no one but a native of the Snæfellsness Peninsula could possibly have written our saga, one who knew literally every rock and rill of that devious and difficult terrain, especially the northern versant, from having lived and fared there for many years with an open eye for its physical and historical features. No casual visitor could give as accurate and detailed descriptions of localities and routes. And no mistakes can be detected here.

Neither can any serious error be found in the author's historical and genealogical information. His consuming interest in the "antiquities" of his home land has made *Eyrbyggja* a veritable treasure trove for the folklorist, the archeologist, the student of cults and traditions. Here we find such precious information as the settlers' mode of selecting their dwelling-place on the newly discovered island—how Thórólf Mostrarskegg, after ascertaining the will of "his good friend, the god Thór," takes with him on his ship, already loaded with kinsfolk, slaves, and chattels, the timber of Thór's temple, together with the soil under the pediment of the altar; how, on approaching Iceland, he throws overboard the pillars of his highseat on which the image of the god was carved, to let Thór show him where to settle. There follows the justly famous, and accurate, description of the shrine he erects, its furnishings, and the ritual of the sacrifice. We learn that the locality of the assembly on Thórsness is so holy for him that it must in no way be desecrated, and that the mountain of Helgafell on it becomes the abode of departed kinsmen to which a later descendant is given a rousing welcome.

But it is not only matters of great moment the author deals with: it interests him, as it certainly does us, to know that in those early times tasseled shoestrings were in fashion, how people on board a ship managed about food and drink, and that all the household used to sit by the warm kitchen fire before the evening meal.

In all these matters he exhibits the same scrupulous exactness of statement, the same reserve about an assertion, which leads him to say on numerous occasions: "It is the opinion of some," "the rumor spread,"

"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 superstitions 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 *liotes* (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 leaf 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 adducing 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 *visur* attributed to Bjorn Breidvíkingr, 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 Thormód Trefilsson. 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 *Eyrbyggja* 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 loanwords* 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-Magnæan 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 *Vatnshyrna*, 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, Árni Magnússon, himself; another by Ketill Jörundarson. 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 *Vatnshyrna* 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

Ketil 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 Grím, a lord of Sogn.¹ Ketil was married. His wife was Yngvild, the daughter of Ketil Wether, a chieftain of Raumaríki.² Their sons were called Bjorn and Helgi; and their daughters were Aud the Profound, Thórunn Hyrna, and Jórunn the Sagacious. Ketil's son Bjorn was given in fosterage to be reared by Earl Kjallak of Jämtland,³ 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]⁴ 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. Thereupon 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 chieftains in the Western Isles

¹District around the Sogn Fjord in West Norway.

²The present Romerike, district in southeastern Norway.

³Jämtland, 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.

⁴So named because they form the backbone of the Scandinavian peninsula.