

I

ENCOUNTERING THE SAGAS

The sagas of Icelanders are the most distinctive, and today the most widely read and admired, of the many different kinds of text produced in medieval Iceland. Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, Icelanders produced as rich, varied, and extensive a vernacular literature as was produced anywhere in medieval Europe. That literature has ever since been central to Icelandic cultural identity. It has also played a prominent role in the formation of national identity in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden since the sixteenth century, as well as in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany, where it was valued for the insights it was believed to offer into a shared Germanic past. Medieval Icelandic literature has also inspired many notable writers in English since the eighteenth century, including Sir Walter Scott, William Morris, J. R. R. Tolkien, W. H. Auden, and A. S. Byatt, among many others.

Medieval Iceland became the main repository of legendary and mythological material once shared by speakers of Germanic languages across northern Europe. It also preserved a corpus of uniquely intricate verse known as skaldic (or scaldic) poetry (see further ch. 2 below). Skaldic poetry was in turn one of several source traditions for a body of prose narratives set in the past for which there is no parallel elsewhere in the period. These narratives are known throughout the world by their originally Icelandic name as sagas. There are several different kinds of Icelandic saga, but the most widely read and appreciated today are the sagas of Icelanders, the subject of this book.

Here is a passage from one of these sagas; it is translated fairly literally to

reflect stylistic features that are often obscured in more idiomatic published translations, such as the vacillation between past and present verb tenses:

It happened that a bull which Karlsefni and his company owned ran out of the wood and it bellows loudly. This frightened the Skrælings and they run to their boats and then rowed south from the land. There was then no sign of them for three weeks. But when that time had passed, they saw a great company of Skrælings traveling from the south like a stream. Their poles were then all being swung with-ershins and they all howl very loudly. Then Karlsefni and his men took up their red shields and carried them against them.

The Skrælings ran from their ships and then they went together and fought. The battle became fierce because the Skrælings had war-slings. Karlsefni and his men saw that the Skrælings raised up a very big ball on a pole, almost as big as a sheep's stomach, and it was rather black in appearance, and they threw it from the pole up onto the land and over Karlsefni's company, and it made a hideous noise when it came down.

At that, great fear came over Karlsefni and all his company, so that no one wanted anything other than to flee and they keep to the river because it seemed to them that the company of Skrælings were driving all their force at them and they do not stop until they come to some rocks and there they offered hard resistance.

Freydís came out and saw that Karlsefni and his men were fleeing and she called out: "Why are such worthy men as you running away from these detestable men, such that it seems to me that you could be slaughtered like cattle? If I had a weapon it seems to me I should fight better than anyone of you."

They paid no attention to her words. Freydís wanted to follow them and became slow because she was pregnant [literally "not well"]. Then she went after them into the wood, but the Skrælings attacked her. She found in front of her a dead man. That was Þor-brandr Snorrason and he stood with a stone slab in his head. His sword lay drawn beside him. She picked it up and prepared to defend herself. Then the Skrælings came at her. Then she pulled out

a breast from under clothes and slapped it with the sword. The Skrælings took fright at that and ran down to their ships and rowed away. Karlsefni and his men find her and praise her good luck.

Two of Karlsefni's men died and many of the Skrælings. Karlsefni and his men had faced an overwhelming force and they now went back home to their dwellings and bound their wounds and considered what that multitude of men had been which attacked them from inland. It seemed to them now that there must have been the one company which came from the boats and the (other) people must have been illusions.

The Skrælings found a dead man and an axe lay beside him. One of them picked up the axe and cuts a tree with it, and then each after the other does this, and it seemed to them to be a treasure and to cut well. Then one of them struck a stone with it and so broke the axe and then it seemed to them to be of no use, as it could not withstand stone, and they threw it down.

It now seemed to Karlsefni and his men that although the quality of the land was good there would always be fear and conflict on account of those who already lived there. Then they prepared to leave and intended to return to their land and they sailed north along the coast. (*Eiríks saga rauða* ch. 11; my trans.)

Such a passage may prompt a number of questions for readers new to the genre. Does this excerpt come from a historical or a fictional text? How realistic is this narrative? How ought one to make sense of the apparently unrealistic aspects? What is their narrative effect? Who are the Skrælings? What does the passage reveal about gender roles and relations between men and women? Why do the verb tenses shift between present and past?

The excerpt comes from a thirteenth-century Icelandic text that we will look at in more detail in chapter 4 below; it is known as *Eiríks saga rauða*, the *Saga of Eiríkr (Eric) the Red* (i.e., red-headed). *Eiríks saga* is one of several medieval texts that tell of the discovery of North America by Norse-speakers during the Viking Age, roughly five centuries before Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean; the Skrælings in the passage we have just looked at are Native Americans or First Nation people.

The saga was written at least two hundred years after the events that it purports to describe would have taken place, so although it may have some basis in history, it mixes historical fact with what we would call fiction (we shall see that its writer may not have made quite the same distinction between those types of discourse as we do). Both the vacillation between past and present verb tenses and the preference for linking clauses and sentences by parataxis (with “and” or “but”) are characteristic of saga narrative and may be a legacy of oral storytelling traditions. At this point in the story, Eiríkr the Red’s son Leifr has been blown off course from Greenland (where his father lives) and discovered a land to the west, which was given the name Vínland. A character called Þorfinnr Karlsefni has set out from Greenland to explore Vínland, and he and his crew (including Freydís, the illegitimate daughter of Eiríkr the Red) have wintered at a place called Hóp, where they encounter the native population in the passage quoted above. Cultural differences between the Norse-speakers and the indigenous people are encapsulated in the anecdote about the axe, which indicates that the Skrálings were unfamiliar with iron. Freydís’s words and behavior express ideals of gendered behavior (from which the men fall short) at the same time as she subverts those expectations by bravely confronting the attackers. Kirsten Wolf has argued that Freydís takes on an Amazonian aspect in this episode, especially in the variant reading of a seventeenth-century manuscript in which she does not just slap her breast with the sword but actually cuts it off and throws it back at the attackers (Wolf 1996: 481–85).

The sagas of Icelanders genre is pervasively concerned with issues of identity: national, religious, social, and personal. This passage from *Eiríks saga* is about an encounter with the “other,” with an alien and unfamiliar people and culture. It hinges on beliefs—and anxieties—about ethnic, perhaps even racial, identity. But it is also informed by understandings of social and personal identity, notably in the way that Freydís articulates an ideology of gender roles. The bull’s awareness of what is occurring at the start of the passage and the settlers’ mysterious delusion that they are being attacked by two armies point to a blurring of the boundaries between animal and human and between the natural and the supernatural that is characteristic of many sagas; identity can be brought into question by this