Local tales and shared knowledge in Old Icelandic family sagas

1-2. The ‘theory of oral narratives’ vs. the ‘theory of retrospection’.

- A. [The mainstream]. Old Icelandic Sagas are narrative pieces written down in a codified form of literary language. They may have some oral roots (i.e., be based on local *munnmæli*), but should be nevertheless analyzed in the context of written culture.
- Information transmitted orally (*munnmæli*) cannot be called ‘oral sagas’, since the essential features of the genre have developed in the written period. Moreover, available versions of Old Icelandic sagas reveal the influence of other written texts, both Icelandic and Latin.
- Old Icelandic family sagas embody a retrospective look to the past.
- The persons who have written down Old Icelandic sagas acted as their authors, nearly in the same manner as authors of modern literary texts. Most authors of Old Icelandic sagas are anonymous, but it is arguable that the contemporaries knew their names and identified them as authors.
- The narrators of Old Icelandic sagas acted consciously and had individual narrative devices, like authors of modern fiction texts.
- Old Icelandic Sagas typically have a protograph.

- B. [Heusler, Steblin-Kamenskij and the ‘Historical-Poetics’-framework]. A Saga is a special ‘information-preserving form’ developed at an oral stage in order to keep information about important events of the past. It was necessary to tell a story (= an ‘oral saga’) in a canonical form, i.e. in a way, which the audience could find appropriate. An average Old Icelandic listener was capable of retelling a saga in (nearly) the same form.
- Old Icelandic family sagas stand closest to the above sketched construct, since they both represent local tales (originally linked to given families or areas) and shared knowledge of information supposed to be relevant for the society as a whole.
- The Sagas are based on selection of information. Details, which had been found irrelevant for the story, were omitted, direct evaluations of events and partial sympathies were banned. The structure of a saga hinted the listeners which events are central to the story and which details are marginal.
- Medieval Icelanders lacked a concept of a fixed text. The appearance of the written language did not interrupt the tradition of oral transmission in Old Iceland, hence significant variations in the manuscripts of one and the same saga. The narrators/scribes in most cases did not perceive themselves or their forerunners as authors; that is why they felt free to make changes in the written text. Such changes could be caused both by the influence of written sources as well as by the influence of oral sources.
- Unlike authors of modern average European texts, the narrators of the sagas acted unconsciously. Therefore, one should not speak of ‘individual narrative devices’ of Snorri, Sturla etc.
- The notion of ‘protograph’ is not applicable to Old Icelandic sagas, since an early version may be less genuine than a later one.
A straightforward application of both approaches to Old Icelandic Sagas leads to various infelicities and strained interpretations. Theories of both types contain aprioristic statements, which cannot be verified empirically.

II. The contrast of oral vs written perspective of Old Icelandic Sagas is often merged with two other distinctions:

- Authenticity /Historic reliability vs Fiction & Fancy.
- Local sources vs locally unbound sources.

The idea that ‘Oral’ always means ‘prior to written fixation’ + ‘old, written down in the beginning of the written activity’ + ‘probable and trustworthy’ + ‘local source’ is wrong.


- Arons saga Hjörleifssonar. Late fixation (ca. 1330-1350). Partial sympathies. Based on oral traditions about Aron and bishop Guðmundr. The version of the narrator is not trustworthy (in fact, we can even check the places where his interpretation is biased and/or dubious). At the same time, Arons saga contains more verifiable details than other three sagas.
- Eyrbyggja. Written down around 1250-1260. The saga gives an unbiased version of its events. It is presumably based on local tales from Breiðafjörður. Despite of it, the information borrowed from this tales is not always trustworthy (cf. the stories about witchcraft, trolls, walking deadmen, faraway journeys etc.). References to heathen times and detailed descriptions of heathen rites in this saga may be a kind of learned falsification (I know I am deviating from most of my colleagues in this point).
- Færeyinga saga. Early Fixation, the protograph dated with ca. 1210-1215. The language is very colloquial, i.e. the saga has clear oral roots. The version appears trustworthy, but the number of verifiable details is rather small. The local colour is a result of literary falsification, since the saga is not based on a Faroese oral tradition.
- Bandamanna saga. Late Fixation (Early XIV th century). The version is not biased to any of the characters, but not reliable either. The narrator was inclined to invent grotesque situations and to make a lampoon of his saga. Nevertheless, his fancy was to some extent guided by an oral tradition about the main character, Oddr Ófeigsson. Is seems possible that many details of Oddr’s early biography, irrespective of the fact whether true or not, were not invented by the narrator himself, but borrowed from local traditions of Miðfjörður about an extremely rich and successful merchant from this area.

III. Does the distinction of ‘local’ vs ‘locally unbound’ sources coincide with the contrast of ‘oral’ vs ‘bookish’ sources?

The answer is No.

The sources of Eyrbyggja:

- Chronology of events. Arguably taken from Ari’s books.
Marginal details in the saga might have been due to the narrator’s speculations and guesses about the origin of grotesque place names as Berserkjahraun ‘the clinker of berserks’, Dritsker ‘shitty skerry’, Þórr’s stone etc.

Skaldic poetry. The lion’s share is ascribed to the enemies of the main character, Snorri godi, people from the clan of Kjalleklingar: Þórarinn svarti – 17 stanzas, Björn Breiðvíkingakappi – 7 stanzas. An unequivocally positive image of Snorri is found only in 5 stanzas by Þormóðr trefill and in a stanza by Oddr Breiðfirðingr. These stanzas are safely attributed and dated with late X- early XI century.

The idea of Eyrbyggja’s narrator as the man who has responsible for composing a great deal of skaldic stanzas in this saga is not tenable. Most stanzas have preceded the saga in its existing form.

Where does skaldic poetry from Eyrbyggja come from? Has it been transmitted coupled with the prosaic narratives or not?

Þórarinn svarti. All stanzas are tied up to the fight at Mávahlíð (980 A.M.) The skald’s biography was less remarkable, after deduction of this episode. Þórarinn was not a suitable candidate for the role of saga character and neither oral nor written saga about could have existed. On the contrary, a series of stanzas about the fight at Mávahlíð could be transmitted orally without long prosaic comment. It is arguable that most stanzas are authentic or at least attributed to Þórarinn svarti on a very early stage, not later than in the XI century.

Björn Breiðvíkingakappi. The stanzas do not contain a cycle. Björn has been a famous man, a tough guy and a real hero and we may assume that the stanzas attributed to him were part of an oral tradition about this enemy of Snorri. It is plausible that this saga was designed as a skald’s story. In any case, to the time of written fixation of Eyrbyggja, Björn was perceived as the author of several stanzas, which tell about romantic feelings. The stylistic and metrics of these stanzas is so unusual that the idea of Eyrbyggja’s narrator as their author is implausible.

*Styrs saga*. Its existence is directly verified by the Heiðarvíga saga. The genetic relationship between Eyrbyggja and Heiðarvíga remains unclear, it is not possible to establish whether Eyrbyggja’s narrator knew the text of *Styrs saga* in a written form.

Prosaic tradition about Snorri godi is built around his legal disputes, the narrator emphasizes how Snorri has benefited from his intellectual superiority and competence in laws. Contrarywise, the skalds praise Snorri for acts for violence, while the narrator praises him for being peaceful in his late years.

Genealogies. Most of them are seen in chapters X-XI and LXV.

Folklore. We should not feel shy and coy because of this word. Chapters XVI, XVIII, XX, XXXIV, XL, L-LV, LVI, LXIII.

Both genealogies and folklore represent local knowledge (its transmission has arguably been restricted with a very small area in Iceland.)
One has to keep these sources apart. Cf. the reference to tales about the *slaves of Hallsteinr* in ch. XLVIII. (We are lucky: this piece folklore about the origin of the place name *Svefnijar* has been written down as late as in the XIX century!).

The narrator of the saga knew this piece of folklore, but he was no longer capable of identifying the slaves’ owner with a character of his saga, *Hallstein Bórolfsson*, mentioned early in Ch. III-IV!

- **The wonders** (*Undr*). Witchescraft and illnesses. I suggest that tales about the demonic *Þorólf* Crooked Leg and mysterios *Þorgunna* reflect some vague memories about illnesses in the district: these memories should have lived in the corresponding area but where probably less known to people from other parts of the country before the narrator of *Eyrbyggja* has included them in his saga. Assume that you are told a story about a couple of people who died of an illness in the same remote valley during a short period of time. Is this information relevant for the whole country? Hardly. But this information may be still of some interest for those who live in the same households two generations later (or two centuries later). In the case of *Þorgunna* we even obtain a direct indication that the illness came from a foreign ship and was later spread by the garments of the diseased woman: these garments have not been burned down, in spite of a sound piece of advice.

- **Faraway journeys.** *Eyrbyggja* includes a fascinating account about a famous man from the district, *Björn Breidvíkingakappi*: a noted merchant, Guðlaug, has allegedly met him in some remote country to the south of *Vindland*. According to the saga, this might have happened in Mexico or South Atlantic Cost of the United States. Although such a possibility cannot be excluded technically — Icelandic and Norwegian ships could reach the Americas — most comments make fun of this episode. Björn’s story is of course not that reliable, but its reliability is not lower than in those parts of the saga, which provide us with a description of heathen rites. The narrator tries to appear reliable to his audience and even stipulates that ‘he has not any independent evidence to prove the story of Guðlaugr from Straumfjörðr’. We should not forget that this *Guðlaugr* who reportedly had met Björn in the Brave New World, was a man of a high rank and an ancestor of Sturlungar.

- **Heathen rites and conjectures.** Germanic personal names could be both extended and reduced, but no two-component name could be freely substituted with any other two component name in the historic period. Below we list some evidence from the XIII th century.

  - A man, whose name was *Þor-steinn*, got a nickname *Urðar-steinn*: *Urðar* was the name of his household. [*Þor-steinn → Steinn*]

  - A name, whose name was *Þor-grímr*, is somewhere referred to simply as *Grimr*. [*Þor- grímr → Grimr*]

  - An Icelander, whose name was *Þor-kell*, was called *Bitru-keli*: *Bitra* was the name of the district, where he lived, while the component –*keli* is a diminutive form from *Þorkell* [*Þorkell → Keli*]. The nickname of his contemporary *Þor-kell* Fana-keli, who was a Norwegian, is explained in the same way.

But no person bearing a two-component name like *Her-steinn* could be called with any other two-component name: *[Þor-steinn → Her-steinn. Þor -grímr → Þor-steinn]*.
The narrator of Eyrbyggja knew this onomastic principle fairly well but he nevertheless dared to allege that in days of yore superstitious worshippers of Þórr, who were ‘banned to look unwashed at the Holy Mountain’, could do the thing. It is amazing that all commentators of Eyrbyggja believe that this was true and that ages ago Old Icelanders could substitute a regular two-component name like *Hrólfr =*Hroð-ulfr → *Þorólfr! 

Falsification *Þorgrímr > Snorri.*

Why did the character of Eyrbyggja get another name instead of his first one, *Þorgrímr*? Two different explanations in two Old Icelandic Sagas – Gísla and Eyrbyggja, but both explanations are nothing more than wrong conjectures.

- The kid behaved badly. Therefore he got a nickname *Snerrir* ‘fidgeter’, and finally, *Snorri* ‘fidget’.
  
  Fine, but *Snorri* is not a nickname, but a personal name attested in Iceland from the beginning of the Xth century.

- The kid’s father (*Þorgrímr*) had an ill fate and was killed. The little one was born after the father’s death and got the same name. This is an unhappy situation. Let’s call the guy *Snorri*, and he will be OK.
  
  Fine, but why call him *Snorri* and not *Skorri* etc.?


*Snorri goði (*Þorgrímr Þorgrimsson) got his name after his sworn brother Snorri Þorbrandsson, who probably was the same age.

IV. CONCLUSION

The main distinction within the sources of *Eyrbyggja* appears to be not as much the distinction of oral vs. written sources, but the distinction of Local vs. Locally non bound sources.

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