

Norse Kings' Sagas Spread to the World

JON GUNNAR JØRGENSEN

The University of Oslo

1. The writing of Kings' sagas

The Kings' sagas are regarded as a separate genre of Icelandic saga literature. They have been, and still are of extraordinary value as sources of Scandinavian history, but also from an aesthetic point of view – as literature. The Kings' sagas were also the first part of the Icelandic saga treasure to awaken the attention abroad in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The main subject of these sagas is the lives and political career of Scandinavian, mainly Norwegian, kings from the Viking Age and through the life of King Hakon Hakonsson (d. 1263). It is a mystery how and why this literature developed in the periphery area of Iceland, at a time Icelanders did not even have a king of their own. It is hard to believe that pure historical interest could have been sufficient motivation. Perhaps it was a way to discuss the problematic lack of a Head of State which was prescribed by the medieval models of government. This could be actualised by the serious internal conflicts of the Sturlunga era. The writing of sagas could also be motivated by a request for a *cultural capital*, as some Icelandic scholars have argued recently, with the reference to the ideas of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (See e. g. Torfi H. Tulinius 2004). Saga manuscripts have also been pointed out as a valuable article of export (see Stefán Karlsson 1979). The Icelandic Sagacodices have no doubt been of great value to the Norwegian aristocracy and the kings of Norway. However, this cannot explain the developing of the art in Iceland, only that several saga codices found their way to Norway in the late Middle Ages. Whatever the explanation can be, it is a fact that a literature of outstanding value about Scandinavian – especially Norwegian – history was produced in Iceland in the 13th century. In the following centuries, these sagas caught the attention of scholars and readers in all Europe and the whole world.

Approaching the Viking Age. Proceedings of the International Conference on Old Norse Literature, Mythology, Culture, Social Life and Language. Edited by Ērika Sausverde and Ieva Steponavičiūtė. (Scandinavistica Vilnensis 2). Vilnius University Press, 2009.

<https://doi.org/10.15388/ScandinavisticaVilnensis.2009.2.4>

Copyright © 2019 Authors. Published by Vilnius University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

The golden age of the Kings' sagas was contemporary with the developing of the medieval kingdom of Norway, beginning with king Sverrir and reaching its zenith under Hakon Hakonsson. Snorri Sturluson was an older contemporary of Hakon, and also closely connected to him. He visited Norway twice during Hakon's rule. After the decay of the Norwegian Realm the composing of Kings' sagas also diminished. It seems to have been some activity of reproducing sagas in great codices through the first decades of the 14th century, but then this interest also seems to have decreased. The Flatey-book was written at the end of the 14th century, and can be seen as a grand finale for the genre in Iceland. In the 15th century, the romantic sagas take over the scene.

In the 14th century the Norwegian Realm fell apart. As the court moved east to Sweden with Magnus Eiriksson in the first half of the century, the Norwegian aristocracy disbanded, and so did the interest for the sagas. Seen from the 15th century viewpoint, the writing and reading of Kings' sagas belonged to the past. The beautiful vellums still were on Norwegian shelves, but nobody paid any attention to them. And why should the Icelanders bother? Why should they read and rewrite these sagas? They did not. The Kings' sagas now belonged to the past. They had in double meaning become history – they were no longer relevant to the present.

But at one point, the sagas were somehow brought back to the stage. I will look into how this re-introduction of the Kings' sagas happened, and present the first three printed editions. The first two introduced the material to Scandinavians readers and historians. I will here, however, emphasize the third one, from 1697 that made the sagas available to the whole of learned Europe. The three editions are:

Norske Kongers Krønike oc bedriff. Copenhagen 1594 (Jens Mortensen's Chronicle)

Norske Kongers Chronica. København. Copenhagen 1633 (Peder Claussøn Friis' Saga Translations)

Snorre Sturlusons Nordländske Konunga Sagor. Stockholm 1697 [–1700] (Johan Peringskiöld's Edition)

2. The revival of the sagas

In the 16th century, a new interest for historiography developed in Europe, and one turned again to the medieval sagas. This new attitude was introduced in the continent by the renaissance humanists. History could not only quench learned peoples thirst for knowledge, it could also be a chessman in the game of power. Along with the rivalry between royal authorities and the church, the historical chronicles could be used to strengthen the king's power and to legitimate his rule, in a similar way to how the church used literature in its propaganda.

The academic renaissance for the classic profane literature, written in Latin, had grown strong in Europe in the 15th century, and at the beginning of the 16th, it also reached Scandinavia. A new quest for historical literature followed. I consider it probable that the publishing of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, the Latin chronicle of the Danes, in 1514, may have been the trigger for the new reading of the Norse sagas. This edition was widely spread and became a most prestigious work. The reading of *Gesta Danorum* most often just called "Saxo" also inspired small learned circles in Norway, first of all in Bergen. After having published "Saxo", the editor, Christiern Pedersen, caught interest in the historical material hidden in old, half-forgotten manuscripts in Norway. Somehow, he must have been informed of their existence, and at a time, probably in the 1530's, he requested some excerpts of the sagas to be translated into Danish. We are not certain who wrote these excerpts, but there are indications that it might have been the later magistrate (Norw.: *lagmann*) of Bergen, Jon Simonsson (1512–1575) (Jørgensen, Jon Gunnar 1993/2, esp. pp. 169–171 and 182–186). The so-called "Christiern Pedersen's Excerpts" are the first signs of the revived interest in Kings' sagas after the Middle Ages.

Members of the learned circles of Bergen did several approaches to the Saga literature in the 16th century. In addition to "Christiern Pedersen's Excerpts" at least two other translations – or, more correctly, paraphrases of Kings' sagas in Danish were made and sent to Copenhagen. One of them, that goes by the name "Laurents Hanssøn's Saga-translation" was made for a definite purpose; namely, for the education of the Danish crown prince Frederik. The text is only found in one single manuscript, which still exists in the Arnamagnæan Collection in

1. The portrait of Peder Claussøn Fries in Valle Church, near Lindesnes on the southern edge of Norway. Some biographical key-notes are written in the left upper corner, but the year of his death is written later on the opposite side.



Copenhagen (AM 93 fol.). The other translation, made by the magistrate of Bergen, Mattis Størssøn, must have been spread among interested colleagues, because it is known from several manuscripts. One of these fell into the hands of the historian Christopher Huitfeldt in Copenhagen, who engaged Rev. Jens Mortensen to have it published.

Norske Kongers Krønike oc bedriff was printed in 1594. It was a small book, the text was both corrupted and shortened, but it was very important. The translator, Mattis Størssøn, is not mentioned at all; probably he was not even known by the editor. Neither can we find one word about Snorri Sturluson nor the Icelandic origin of the text. That kind of information we could not either expect, since it was unknown at the time. The publishing of this book is remarkable, because it is the first printing of Old Norse saga material at all. Now the door to the saga literature was opened for readers and scholars outside the narrow circles in Bergen and Copenhagen.

Though the text of this first edition was short and paraphrasing, *Ynglinga saga* was reproduced in a fuller shape. *Ynglinga saga*

is the first part of *Heimskringla*, containing the mythic pre-history of the Norwegian kings' kin. This material was a special treasure to the Swedes. I will soon return to the enthusiastic reception of the sagas in Sweden.

The 1594 chronicle was the pioneer edition of Kings' Sagas, and it was printed in a very limited number of copies. Nobody could predict the formidable demand for saga literature in the future. That explains why the edition is so rare today; it is only to be found in very few academic libraries and in a few private collections, in all probably not more than ten copies.¹ The 1594 edition was important as a first introduction to the material. Besides its great importance to the Swedes, it probably also inspired and motivated the next edition, published in 1633 (also in Copenhagen).

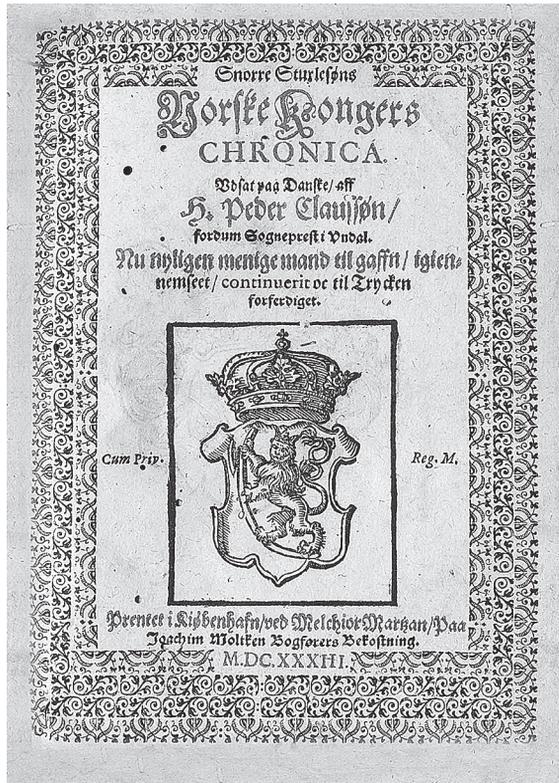
3. The Scandinavian break-through for Kings' sagas

Shortly after the 1594 edition was published, Peder Claussøn Friis (1545–1616) started to prepare a far more extensive one. Peder Claussøn was a vicar in Audnedal, on the southern edge of Norway. The key information of his biography is painted on his portrait, situated in Valle Church, where he practised. He may have looked like this. The portrait is probably painted while he was still alive, since the year of his death was added later.

Fifteen years after Peder's death, the famous Danish scholar Ole Worm became acquainted with the translation. He obtained a manuscript and published it in 1633. This was the first holistic printed reproduction of the sagas. This edition was certainly printed in a larger number of copies, since it still is rather easy to find, both in libraries, private collections and at antiquarian booksellers, and it had tremendous influence. Due to this very edition *Heimskringla* was established as a monument in the Scandinavian history of literature. Today the Icelandic "Snorre" (i. e. *Heimskringla*) is considered at the top of the canon of literature in Norway, above the works of Norwegian authors. The position of *Heimskringla* in Scandinavia and later especially in Norway was

¹ According to unverified information from Deichmanske bibliotek, the Municipal Library of Oslo, there are six in public libraries. Two are known in private collections. Not all of the copies are complete.

2. The title page of Peder Claussøn's saga translation, published in Copenhagen 1633 by Ole Worm. It tells us that Snorre Sturlason is the author of the work. The vignette shows the Norwegian Coat of Arms, "The Norwegian Lion".



established by the 1633-edition, and also, by this edition, the author Snorri Sturluson was connected to the work. That was news in the 17th century Scandinavia, and also in Iceland.

Peder Claussøn's *Norske Kongers Chronica* (NKC) became important in all the Scandinavian countries, including Iceland. I have already mentioned that the attribution to Snorri was unknown also in Iceland till the book was published, even by the most learned specialist, Arngrímur Jónsson (1568–1648). The acquaintance with the book also led to a revival of interest in the Kings' sagas in Iceland. Now Icelandic scribes began to reproduce Kings' sagas anew. Through lack of old Icelandic manuscript exemplars, some scribes took the text from Peder Claussøn and translated parts of it back into Icelandic.

In Sweden, the edition became an important source for Swedish historians and antiquarians. Gothicists believed that Goths were the ancestors of Swedes, and that the Old Norse language was Gothic.

Therefore, the Old Icelandic literature in their eyes also had its roots in Sweden. The NKC 1633 served as inspiration, source and editorial model for the first Swedish edition (1697), which I will soon present.

In Denmark, NKC found its place besides “Saxo”. It is evident that the two works were soon regarded as a couple – the twin-chronicles of the twin-states. If you look at the vignette on the title page, you see the Norwegian Lion, the national coat of arms. Further the book is dedicated to Christopher Urne, who was the governor of Norway in 1633. After 1633 and till the end of the 19th century, new translations of “Saxo” were always planned together with new or revised translations of “Snorre”. In 1757 a revised version was published in Copenhagen. The text had been completely rewritten, but the editor was not even mentioned on the title page. All tribute went to the great Peder Claussøn, and when the monumental scholarly edition of Kings’ sagas was being prepared in Copenhagen starting in 1770’s and under the leadership of Gerhard Schønning, the editors were instructed to keep Peder Claussøn’s style in the new translation.

It was doubtless the 1633 edition that established the position of the Kings’ sagas also in the Norwegian, National canon. But it did not happen until the 19th century, when the new independent nation developed, that “Snorre” really grew big in Norway. Now the thread was taken up from Peder Claussøn and new translations made. These have found their way literally into every home.

4. Peringskiöld 1697. From Scandinavia to the wide world

We have now followed the Kings’ sagas on their journey from Iceland to Norway, and further to Denmark. Through the two first printed editions, the sagas spread in the Nordic countries. But still, because of the language, they were not introduced to the learned European community. The discovery of Ynglinga saga was especially celebrated with enthusiasm in Sweden. Swedes had ever since 1514 envied their Danish neighbours and rivals their “Saxo”. In the following decades, Swedish authors made several attempts to write a similar proper history of Swedes. Best known is the one by Johannes Magnus, *Historia de omnibus gothorum sueonumque regibus* (‘History of all Kings of Goths and Swedes’), printed in 1554. But the Swedish historians had a serious problem – the lack of written sources. In Ynglinga saga they could read



3. The first edition of the Icelandic text of *Heimskringla* was published in Stockholm, 1697, edited by Johan Peringskiöld. The edition was provided with translations both to Swedish (in the right column) and Latin (at the bottom).

that Odin and his companions, the “diar” settled in Uppsala, and made Sweden the home of the *Ynglings*, the ancestors of the Norwegian kings. That was really a fat bite for the Gothicists.

In the middle of the 17th century a strong historical academy was founded in Uppsala, Collegium Antiquitatum (‘College of Antiquities’). A large community of scholars and assistants did historical studies and published historical sources and writings. In 1679 the Icelandic student Guðmundur Ólafsson was engaged as the successor of his countryman Jonas Rugman. Now a prestigious edition of *Heimskringla* received high priority. It was Johan Peringskiöld (the elder) who became the leading editor and person-in-charge of the project and Guðmundur Ólafsson, who had been recruited at the University of Copenhagen, became his indispensable assistant, helping his superior to understand the Icelandic text and translating it into Swedish. Another Icelander, Jón Eggertsson, occasionally staying in Copenhagen, transcribed for them the most important *Heimskringla* manuscript – “Kringla”. He also made a journey to Iceland in order to collect and buy manuscripts for the Swedes,

a task he accomplished with great success, though it was against the law. The Danish king had forbidden Icelanders to transmit manuscripts to any other than his own representatives. One of the manuscripts that Jón bought for his Swedish employers was the so-called Húsafellsbók, a 17th century manuscript containing Kings' sagas, compiled with NKC 1633 as a template. Large parts of the text were translated from the Danish printed text and back to Icelandic (see Ólafur Halldórsson 1976).

As copy-text for his edition Peringskiöld used the “Kringla” transcription by Jón Eggertsson. But in addition he used every other available source. The whole “Kringla” text was collated against NKC and Húsafellsbók, and if a passage or some information should be missing in “Kringla”, it was carefully supplied by the other sources. The additional text from Húsafellsbók followed *Heimskringla* through later editions for more than a century.

Peringskiöld's edition was a great step forwards as a source publication. It reproduced the text from the manuscripts far more confidently than the older Danish editions, and for the first time the *Heimskringla* text was printed in the original language. But the edition offered more – it was trilingual. In addition to Icelandic, the text was translated both into Swedish and Latin. The concept with a synoptic presentation of the Icelandic text with a Swedish translation had been used in several editions from the Collegium Antiquitatum before *Heimskringla*, and this was also the intention now. The Swedish translation was done by Guðmundur Ólafsson and revised by Peringskiöld. But as the work took form, Peringskiöld applied to the chancellery for time and funding to provide the edition also with a Latin translation, so that the whole world of learned could share this treasure, and be acquainted with the ancestors of the Goths. The authorities were favourable, and the Latin translation was produced by Peringskiöld himself.

The result, especially the Latin translation, was naturally heavily criticised by Danish scholars – they were certainly envious. Nevertheless, the work was really impressive as a whole. The text covers the whole *Heimskringla*, from Ynglings to Magnus Erlingsson in two volumes. The first volume was published in 1697, the second a couple of years later, probably 1700. The title *Heimskringla* was in this edition related to the work. Earlier it had been used with reference to the manuscript “Kringla”, the copy-text for the edition.

My first thought when I examined Peringskiöld's edition, was that the prior purpose of the Latin text was to give the volumes an academic impression and prestige. I questioned whether the book really had a market outside the Nordic countries. It might, of course, be a matter of importance that "Saxo" was in Latin, and therefore desirable also to have *Heimskringla* available in Latin. It might be that Latin primarily simply signaled that the content was of scholarly significance. It seems, however, that the edition really found its way to the learned Europe and that there definitely was an international interest. It was reviewed in foreign magazines and referred to by learned writers. As early as in 1698, Lorentz Hertel refers to the edition in a letter to Gottfried W. Leibniz (Leibniz 1998, pp. 48–49). Then later in the 18th century we see that the French and English really became interested in Old Norse culture, especially after Paul-Henry Mallet's history of the Danes² and other writings about Scandinavia.

Not the least due to Mallet, Icelandic sagas were introduced to the French during the age of Enlightenment. In the following century of Romanticism saga literature really rooted in the European literary reception. The three editions presented here were important steps to clear the way for the treasure of Icelandic sagas into the European canon.

References

- Torfi H. Tulinius. "Kapital, felt, illusio". *Maal og Minne* 2004, pp. 1–20.
- Stefán Karlsson. "Íslandsk bogekspert til Norge i middelalderen". *Maal og Minne* 1979, pp. 1–17.
- Jørgensen, Jon Gunnar. "Sagaoversettelser i Norge på 1500-tallet". *Collegium Medievale* 1993/2, pp. 169–198.
- Ólafur Halldórsson. "Um Húsafellsbók". *Minjar og menntir: Afmælisrit helgað Kristjáni Eldjárn 6. desember 1976*. Reykjavík 1976, pp. 391–406. (Reprinted in *Grettisfærsla*. Reykjavík 1990).
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*. Erste Reihe: Allgemeiner politischer und historischer Briefwechsel. Berlin 1998.

² *Introduction à l'Histoire de Dannemarc* (Introduction to the History of Denmark). 1 vol. first published 1755.