PART ONE

HISTORY AND CULTURAL CONTACTS
ON READING THE ICELANDIC SAGAS: APPROACHES TO OLD ICELANDIC TEXTS

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The surviving corpus of Old Icelandic texts is vast. Although Icelandic only constitutes a single dialect of Old Norse, the language of the Vikings, by far the largest volume of written material was produced and preserved in Iceland, including almost all the original prose compositions. The quality of some of this is correspondingly high: seen from a purely literary standpoint, Old Icelandic narrative prose achieved a standard which probably outmatches that of any previously recorded in European literatures, including those of Greek and Latin, and which arguably has not itself been outmatched since.

The Old Icelandic sagas were written primarily in a period of at briefest the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, though composition and re-composition continued long thereafter. The term ‘saga’, as used in modern English critical terminology for the texts, and to some extent in the manuscripts of the texts themselves, refers to a narrative text, mostly prose though it often contains poetry, which is more or less complete in terms of the causal structure which constitutes its narrative. Sagas vary greatly in length, but at longest compete with all but the longest modern novels; they may, however, be far shorter than most modern novels, and some only occupy a few printed pages in modern editions. They are often cyclic, and sagas can contain sub-sagas or saga-like sub-structures. The term does not imply any truth-value: the literal meaning of the Norse word saga is ‘thing said, recounted’, and it can be translated as both ‘history’ and ‘story’.

Modern scholars divide the corpus of sagas into several ‘genres’. Those most commonly known as the ‘Icelandic sagas’ are the ‘Sagas of Icelanders’ (Íslendingasögur), a group of approximately thirty or forty texts, depending on how they are counted. These tell of events

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1 These are sometimes in English also inappropriately called ‘Family Sagas’, a term which has no basis in Icelandic usage and which reflects nothing specific to these texts.