

Book review: *The Cambridge History of Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*

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HEATHER O'DONOGHUE AND ELEANOR PARKER (eds.): ***The Cambridge History of Old Norse-Icelandic Literature***. Cambridge University Press. 2024. Pp. xiv + 634; ISBN 978-1-108-48681-1.

There is nothing especially 'Cambridge' about this Cambridge History of Old Norse-Icelandic literature: it is edited by two Oxford scholars, and among the contributors of its twenty-six chapters five (including one of the editors) are from Oxford University, with only one from Cambridge. As the editors explain in their Introduction, the book differs from the two Cambridge Histories of medieval English literature in not taking a chronological approach, since the dating of so much Old Norse-Icelandic literature is far from certain. Instead, the central chapters of the book (7-22) are grouped according to the approximate temporal and geographical settings of the genres treated. Thus part II, 'The Distant Past' (chs 7-9), deals with eddic poetry and the *fornaldarsögur* ('sagas of antiquity' or 'mythical-heroic sagas'); part III, 'The Saga Age' (chs 10-13), with the *Íslendingasögur* ('sagas of Icelanders' or 'family sagas', including the poets' sagas) and court poetry; part IV, 'The New Christian World' (chs 14-18), with poetry of the conversion and subsequent Christian poetry, as well as with saints' lives, homilies, and *biskupa sögur* ('bishops' sagas'); and part V, 'Beyond Iceland' (chs 19-22), with kings' sagas, diaspora sagas (about the Orkneys, Faroes, Greenland and North America), *riddarasögur* ('chivalric sagas'), and *rímur* ('rhymed narrative poems'). These central chapters are preceded by part I, 'Contexts' (chs 1- 6), containing introductory chapters on the history of Iceland, manuscripts, eddic and skaldic metres, theoretical approaches to Old Norse-Icelandic literature, reception, and material culture. They are followed by Part VI, 'Compilations', with chapters 23-26 on the Prose Edda, *samtíðarsögur* ('sagas of contemporary history'), the learned literature of an encyclopedic nature, including the grammatical treatises, and the law code *Grágás*.

The approximate nature of this arrangement will be evident: court poetry, for instance, continued to find settings beyond the Saga Age (c. 930-1030 CE) well into the thirteenth century, and while only a few of the *rímur* have Icelandic settings it is difficult to see them as anything other than distinctively Icelandic (see pp. 460, 472); much the same might be said of the kings' sagas, whose settings are indeed 'beyond Iceland' for the most part. The chapters nevertheless form a satisfying whole, treating different but often related subjects with appropriate reference back and forth and very little overlap. This may be illustrated by sampling the contents of each of the first twelve chapters with a view to showing, perforce fleetingly in some cases, how these relate to each other and to the remaining fourteen.

The association of the land with ritual practice, mentioned in ch. 1, 'History: Iceland from the Settlement to 1400 CE', by Haki Antonsson (p. 16), is elaborated on in ch. 6, 'Landscape and Material Culture', by Jane Harrison, with its discussion of burial mounds (pp. 131-32); and the mention in ch. 1 of Iceland's conversion as the outcome of a legal process (p. 17) is expanded on in ch. 26, 'Grágás and the Legal Culture of Commonwealth Iceland', by William Ian Miller (pp. 540-41), where the conversion is described as a legal rather than a Christian miracle. In ch. 2, 'Manuscripts and Textual Culture', Emily Lethbridge cautiously says of the two manuscript fragments AM 732 a VII 4to (dated c. 1121-39 and containing an Easter table in Latin characters), and the bifolium AM 237a fol. (c. 1150; containing parts of a sermon and a homily) that these are 'said to be', respectively, 'the oldest Icelandic manuscript', and 'the oldest surviving manuscript fragment that preserves text in the vernacular' (pp. 39, 40). The former fragment is mentioned by Guðrún Nordal in ch. 25, 'Learned Literature', by way of preface to her section on the study of the quadrivium in medieval Iceland (p. 523), and in ch. 17, 'Homilies and Christian Instruction', Jonas Wellendorf similarly introduces his discussion of vernacular sermons and homilies with a mention of the latter fragment (p. 363). Ch. 3, by R. D. Fulk, 'Poetic Language, Form and Metre', with its authoritative description of these aspects of eddic and skaldic poetry and *rímur*, greatly assists the reading of the many chapters in the volume dealing with poetry. His discussion on pp. 52-53 of the circumlocutory poetic expressions known as kennings, for instance, finds elaboration and further examples in chs 7, 'Mythological Poetry', by Judy Quinn (pp. 136, 161); 8, 'Heroic Poetry', by Carolyne Larrington (p. 169); 13, 'Court Poetry', by Diana Whaley (pp. 274-77); 14, 'Conversion and Literature', by Christopher Abram (pp. 304, 309, 312); 15, 'Saints' Lives', by Siân Grønlie (pp. 315-16); 16, 'Christian Poetry', by Kirsten Wolf (pp. 337, 339-40, 341); 22, '*Rímur*', by M. J. Driscoll (p. 458); and 23, 'The *Prose Edda*', by Kevin J. Wanner (pp. 494, 496).

Torfi H. Tulinius in ch. 4, 'Theoretical Approaches', includes among these both gender studies (pp. 83-84), and memory studies (p. 86), of which the former is applied by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, in her chapter (18) '*Biskupa sögur*', to two of the bishops' sagas, *Þorláks saga helga* and *Jóns saga helga* (pp. 387-89), and the latter to *Jóns saga* (pp. 385-87). Torfi's mention of the 'bridal quest romance' (p. 79) looks forward to Sif Rikharðsdóttir's discussion of the maiden-king romances in her chapter (21), '*Riddarasögur*' (pp. 444-47). In ch. 5, 'Reception', Verena Höfig first gives a convincing overview of the reception of Old Norse-Icelandic literature by antiquarian and creative recipients from Arngrímur Jónsson (d. 1648) to Richard Wagner (d. 1883; pp. 93-101), but then turns, surprisingly, to an account of modern religious

movements inspired by Germanic mythology, almost entirely in countries other than Iceland. It is disappointing that, having made this change, regrettable in itself, she mentions only in passing (p. 103) the Icelandic neopagan religious organization *Ásatrúarfélagið*, since its adherents must be unique among such organizations in being able to read what are presumably their sacred texts – the poetic and prose Eddas – in the original. M. J. Driscoll refers (p. 452) to the *Ásatrú* religion in his chapter (22) on *rímur*, already mentioned, in a context showing that the composition of *rímur* survives in Iceland from their medieval beginnings to this day. In Ch. 6, also already mentioned, Jane Harrison's references to diaspora studies (p. 120) and to journeying in Orkney from one island to another, and from Orkney to further shores (p. 114), look forward to Judith Jesch's description, in her chapter (20), 'Diaspora Sagas' (pp. 422-23), of Orkney and Faroe as archipelagoes, where such journeying was of necessity frequent. (Among the diaspora sagas she includes *Orkneyinga saga*, *Færeyinga saga*, and the 'Vinland sagas' *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga*.)

As well as discussing in ch. 7, 'Mythological Poetry', the poems presenting the world of the gods in the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda (GKS 2365 4to) and in AM 748 1a 4to, Judy Quinn refers (pp. 135, 159) to eddic and skaldic poems preserved elsewhere, not least as quotations in the Prose Edda, discussed by Wanner in ch. 23, that also present the world of gods, and anticipates chapter 8, 'Heroic Poetry', by Carolynne Larrington, in discussing the Helgi and Sigurðr poems (preserved in the Codex Regius; pp. 156-58), to the extent that they may be regarded as mythological, albeit set for the most part in the recognizably human world which Larrington sees as the setting for heroic poetry (p. 163). Larrington duly treats under this heading these and other poems in the Codex Regius – about Helgi, Sigurðr, Sigurðr's lover Brynhildr and wife Guðrún – and in turn anticipates ch. 9, by Annette Lassen, in also discussing a number of eddic-style poems preserved in the *fornaldarsögur* (pp. 172-83), the subject of that chapter. Among the *fornaldarsögur* Lassen distinguishes between 'heroic' sagas on the one hand and 'Viking and adventure' sagas on the other (pp. 194-96). If by 'adventure' she has in mind here Danish *eventyr* in the sense of 'fairytale, folktale', it is noteworthy that she emphasises (pp. 191, 195, 206) that what appear to be folktale motifs in the *fornaldarsögur* often turn out to be the product of literary rather than folk tradition. She refers (pp. 199-200) to **Huldar saga*, evidently a story about a giantess, as a likely lost example of the *fornaldarsaga* genre, presumably in the 'adventure' category, and told, according to the late thirteenth-century *Sturlu þáttr*, to the Norwegian king Magnús Hákonarson the Lawmender (d. 1280) by Snorri Sturluson's nephew Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1284). The latter's *Íslendinga saga* (not to be

confused with any of the *Íslendingasögur*) forms a major component of *Sturlunga saga* (c. 1300), the compilation of sagas about twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic history to which *Sturlu þátr* is appended, as discussed by Ármann Jakobsson in ch. 24, '*Samtíðarsögur*' (pp. 501-03). Lassen's claim on p. 190 that *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar saga berserjabana*, (dated c. 1325; see p. 197), reflects the introduction of 'frame narrative' into Icelandic literature may raise eyebrows, not least when considered in relation to Wanner's use of this term in ch. 23 (pp. 488, 491, 493), with reference to parts of the Prose Edda, which Wanner accepts with apparent confidence as the work of Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241). Lassen and Wanner may however be using the term in somewhat different senses.

Chapters 10 and 11, '*Íslendingasögur*' and 'Poets' Sagas', by Margaret Clunies Ross and Alison Finlay respectively, both deal with the family sagas, with Clunies Ross finding them closest among saga genres to the *samtíðarsögur* (treated in ch. 24, as shown), albeit set in a relatively distant past, and referring forward (p. 213), to Finlay's chapter in suggesting that the family sagas about poets, if correctly thought to be among the earliest, may with their use of verse quotation (shared by many, but not all, family sagas) reflect the ultimate origins of the genre in oral tradition. Finlay, on the other hand, refers on p. 226 to ch. 19, 'King's Sagas', by Erin Michelle Goeres, in suggesting that the poets' sagas may have had their origins in an impulse to expand on attributions to Icelandic poets of verses cited as sources in historical writings about the kings of Norway.

Chapters 7-11, with their frequent discussion of the interaction of verse and prose and occasional references to prosimetrum (on pp. 163, 165, 170 in ch. 8; p. 216 in ch. 10), pave the way for ch. 12, 'Prosimetrum in the *Íslendingasögur*' by Heather O' Donoghue, who sees the term *prosimetrum* as designating 'a text which uses prose to link poetic passages together' (p. 247). She analyses the aesthetic effects of verse recitation by characters in the sagas; questions the rigidity of the distinction between 'situational' verses (spoken most often in the family sagas by characters in the course of dialogue) and 'corroborative' ones (quoted most often in the kings' sagas by the narrator for authenticating purposes), citing *Eyrbyggja saga* (p. 249) as a family saga in which both are combined; and advocates close study of the presentation of verses in manuscripts in seeking to answer the question of how prosimetrum came to be used in saga composition. Her chapter has positive ramifications not only in those subsequent chapters where prosimetrum is specifically mentioned (on court poetry, ch. 13, pp. 284, 286; on kings' sagas, ch. 19, pp. 395, 397, 399, 407, 411-13, 416; on diaspora sagas, ch. 20, pp. 430-31; and on learned literature, ch. 25, p. 536), but also in those on conversion and literature (ch. 14), Christian poetry (ch. 16),

the Prose Edda (ch. 23), and *samtíðarsögur* (ch. 24). Her chapter thus provides a linking theme for at least half the chapters in the volume.

While some might have wished for still more chapters – on the Old Norse language, for instance (rather skimpily described on p. 559), or on Icelandic folklore as an aspect of reception – this book as it stands seems to me to fulfil admirably its stated aim of offering a view of its subject as ‘an integral and interconnected whole’ (p. 7). I have found very little to criticise in it: my only disappointment was the abrupt change of approach in ch. 5, and since reading chs 9 and 23 I have wondered whether the term ‘frame narrative’, as applied to Old Icelandic literature, needs to be examined and clarified. The book is greatly to be welcomed, and the sooner it is made available to students at a manageable price, the better.