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SAXO IN ICELAND

AMONG the many literary works composed in Iceland in postmedieval times there is a small group derived from printed versions of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus. These works were written between the late seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries and can be divided into two groups. The first consists of translations or retellings of stories found in *Gesta Danorum*, and the second of sagas that have derived their subject matter from Saxo but have been adapted and expanded in various ways. Works in both groups have been influenced by native Icelandic compositions that contain similar accounts to those found in Saxo, and the use of Saxo's material in conjunction with Icelandic sources demonstrates the continuing interest in Iceland in stories concerning traditional heroes.

Most of the manuscripts of the works derived from Saxo are preserved in Iceland, the majority in Landsbókasafn Íslands, the National Library of Iceland, but a number are in other collections in Iceland and elsewhere, or in private hands. Many of the sagas that were produced were extremely popular, as is indicated by the number of extant manuscripts. In addition, *rímur* were composed from some of them during the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. In some cases the sagas and *rímur* were printed in cheap editions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Many sagas and tales were composed in Iceland in post-medieval times using material that entered the country from abroad. Some of these were based on 'Volksbücher' and similar works that circulated internationally. The sagas derived from Saxo are different in that they contained subject-matter partly known to, or at least similar to, material known to Icelanders through their own medieval literature. However, while the medieval sagas of Iceland were only rarely rewritten in later times, the authors of the sagas derived from Saxo in some cases very freely adapted their material in order to suit the changed tastes of the later period.

It is clear from a comparison of these later works with Icelandic literature on one hand and Saxo on the other, that they do not contain any traditional material derived from other than these combined sources. Their value lies in the manner in which they demonstrate the kind of literature produced in Iceland in this period, and the tastes of the audience. In addition, the names of the authors of most of the *rímur* and of some of the sagas are known, and from this it can be seen what people were producing these works and what positions in society they held. The names of some of the people who copied the works are also known.

The first printed editions of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* appeared in the early sixteenth century, but the version that probably reached Iceland first was the shortened and frequently paraphrased rendering into Danish by Anders Sørensen Vedel.¹ This was printed in Copenhagen in 1575, and must have reached Iceland shortly afterwards, as there are sixteenth-century references based on Vedel's translation in the *Oddverja Annáll*.² From the seventeenth century onwards other excerpts from Saxo's work are to be found in Icelandic manuscripts. These are often either direct translations of Vedel or can be recognised as being derived from his version because of their omissions and idiosyncrasies. The earliest of the actual sagas are also probably based on Vedel, since Latin editions of Saxo were apparently never common in Iceland. Two manuscripts containing parts of *Gesta Danorum* are known,³ and there are three nineteenth-century manuscripts of *Starkaðar saga* on which Latin glosses were made (Lbs. 2796 4to, Lbs. 360 4to and JS 436 4to).

A second Danish translation of *Gesta Danorum* appeared in Copenhagen in 1752,⁴ and this also provided a base for a number of Icelandic works. This translation, by Sejer Schousbølle, was much closer to the original than was Vedel's, and he included translations of the verses contained in Saxo, which were omitted by Vedel. Several of the Icelandic works derived from Schousbølle contain verses, but they are rendered in the traditional metre, *fornyrðislag*.

The Icelandic translations of the legendary material in Saxo's History

¹ *Den danske krønike*, 1575. Reprinted Copenhagen 1967.

² *Islanske Annaler indtil 1578*, ed. Gustav Storm, Christiania 1888, xxxx–xxxxi.

³ AM 21 fol. (c. 1700) and AM 28 fol. (first half of seventeenth century).

⁴ *Saxonis Grammatici Historia Danica, Paa Dansk*, ed. H. Godiche, Copenhagen 1752.

are for the most part very short, and concern only one or two heroes. A longer one, made at the end of the seventeenth century (NKS 1590 4to), stretches from the beginning to the death of Hrólfr kraki. It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that all of the first nine books of *Gesta Danorum* were translated into Icelandic, by the indefatigable writer Gísli Konráðsson (1787–1877). Gísli states in a preface to his work that he used Schousbølle's translation, but in addition he larded his own translation with copious references to Icelandic versions of events recounted by Saxo. Many of these references are to *Heimskringla* and to the medieval sagas, but some of them are also to the late sagas based on Saxo. His account of Starkaður is based on the eighteenth-century Icelandic saga (see below), itself a combination of Saxo and the Icelandic sources, in particular *Gautreks saga*. He has worked into this the additional material with which Saxo's account is interspersed so as to include all the possible subject-matter. Another distinctive feature of Gísli's translation is that he has provided verses composed by himself or others which are loose renderings of Saxo's verses.

Although this translation of Saxo is cited in several places as one of Gísli's many works,⁵ only an autograph copy (Lbs. 1133 4to), and one poor copy (Lbs. 4486 4to) by another Icelander of the Vestfirðir, Guðbrandur Sturlaugsson (1820–97), survive. The translation was made too late to be used as the basis for any new sagas and it had no further influence.

One of the earliest of the *sagas* derived from Saxo is based on the two voyages of Thorkillus in Book Eight of *Gesta Danorum*. *Sagan af Gorm kónginum gamla* is known from a single seventeenth-century manuscript (BM Add. 4867, 256r–261v), where it has been written in at the end of a volume that contains several of the *Íslendingasögur*.⁶ Although certain additions have been made about the characters and the voyages they make, and in particular the first voyage, it does not diverge very far from its source. The most important of these additions is that a ferryman named Vöttur ferries Gormur, Thorkillus and their companions from Guðmundur's land to their destination, while in Saxo Guðmundur

⁵ See *Ævisaga Gísla ens fróða Konráðssonar*, Reykjavík, 1911–14, 326.

⁶ *Konungs Gorms gamla þáttur* is also listed by Sólrún Jensdóttir, 'Books Owned by Ordinary People in Iceland, 1750–1830', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XIX (1975–76), 283.

is himself their ferryman. Furthermore, at their destination the heroes do not come across Guðmundur's brother, Geirröður as they do in Saxo, but an old man pierced with an iron rod, whom they see is the deity Loki. The author of the saga clearly knew *Þórsdrápa* in *Snorra Edda*, as he mentions that this journey had been made previously by Þórr and Loki, while Saxo only mentions that Þórr had made the journey, but the fact that he makes Loki Þórr's victim is a new element that he must have included himself.

The setting for this first destination has also been influenced by the setting for the second voyage, and the hall they enter is inside a cave. In spite of these developments, the author goes on to include an account of the second voyage of Thorkillus, which diverges less from Saxo. However, it contains sailing directions not found in the source and the abode of Útgarðaloki is said to be to the west of Greenland. When they arrive, Thorkillus has a conversation with Útgarðaloki on the nature of the afterlife, and Útgarðaloki tells him to pluck a hair from his beard. In Saxo's account Útgarðaloki is simply passive.

This saga was apparently unknown to the person who in 1695 wrote a straight translation of this section of Saxo's work from Vedel's version (JS 625 4to), nor to another Icelander, Páll Pálsson, who also wrote an account of the first voyage in about 1860, which he knew to be derived from Saxo (Lbs. 228 8vo). However, it may have been known to another writer who composed a group of sagas based on Saxo, probably in the early nineteenth century. These will be discussed later.

Also of the late seventeenth century are *Ambáles rímur*,⁷ composed by Páll Bjarnason. These are derived from the tale of Amlethus in *Gesta Danorum*. Páll did not, it appears, use a prose saga as his source. He claims in the rímur that he found the tale in his youth in a German book (xxi. 6). This may be a reference to the summary of the tale made in Low German by the monk Gheismer, which was printed in 1485. This is substantiated by the fact that Páll names his hero Ambáles, while

⁷ *Ambáles rímur* and *Ambáles saga* have been discussed by Israel Gollancz, *Hamlet in Iceland*, London 1898: Gollancz printed a text of the saga and also Gheismer's summary of the story of Amlethus. More recently the relationships between the rímur and the saga have been discussed by Hermann Pálsson in his edition, *Ambales rímur*, Reykjavík 1952 (Rit Rímnafélagsins V). Another text of the saga was printed in Reykjavík: *Sagan af Ambáles*, Kostnaðarmaður Skúli Thoroddsen (Prentsmiðja Þjóðviljans), (no date).

Gheismer calls him Amlethus. However, if Páll knew this summary, he must also have heard a fuller account of Amlethus as his *rímur* contain details not found in the summary. As Vedel's translation was known in Iceland at the time it is likely that this was his other source. In addition to the *rímur* there are some forty manuscripts of a saga of Ambáles, or of Amlóði (which is the name in Eddic poetry of a character thought to correspond to Saxo's Amlethus). These manuscripts fall into two main groups and Hermann Pálsson has shown in his edition of the *rímur* that two sagas were derived independently from the *rímur*.

Probably the next saga to be composed was *Sagan af Hálfðáni Barkarsyni*, which concerns the deeds of the brothers Haldanus and Hildigerus recounted in Book Seven of *Gesta Danorum*. The earliest manuscript of this saga is dated 1744 (Lbs. 2121 4to), and some thirteen other manuscripts survive. In addition a version was printed in 1889.⁸ In contrast to the sagas concerning Ambáles, this saga underwent little change, although certain minor adaptations were made in the names of the chief characters at some early stage. No verses are contained in the saga, which is a fairly good indication that it was based on Vedel rather than on a Latin edition of Saxo, as it is unlikely that any writer would omit these, in particular the death-song of Hildigeir, if he had known them.

As in Saxo the saga is concerned with the fight between the two half-brothers, Hálfðán and Hildigeir. Hálfðán is not aware of their relationship until his brother is dying at his hands. In addition, however, adaptations have been made to soften the tragedy of the situation and to bring the saga into line with other romances of the post-medieval period. For instance, the villain Gunnar, or Gunni, who is merely a marauding viking in *Gesta Danorum*, is given a common romance motivation for his attack on the aging king Rögnvaldur. He demands his kingdom and his daughter, Þrúður. When Rögnvaldur has refused and been slain, Gunnar does not, as in Saxo, drag Þrúður from her refuge and rape her, but marries her instead. In Saxo Þrúður's next husband slays Gunnar in order to avenge Rögnvaldur, but in the saga he does so because he also regards Þrúður as a desirable prize. The two brothers, each a son of one of Þrúður's husbands, are also given more gentle attributes than in Saxo,

⁸ *Sagan af Hálfðáni Barkarsyni*, Þorleifr Jónsson gaf út, Reykjavík (Prentsmiðja Ísafoldar), 1889.

and are nobler by romance standards. For example, Hildigeir displays no desire for revenge for his father's death. When the meeting with Hálf-dán occurs, he is as reluctant as in Saxo to fight Hálf-dán because he is aware that they are brothers, but otherwise the meeting is conducted in rather different terms. Hálf-dán actually requests that the increasing number of champions are sent against him, while in Saxo he merely accepts this when it occurs. He then fights and defeats Hildigeir, and when his dying brother tells him of their relationship, he asks him to slay him too. Hildigeir instead sends a message by Hálf-dán to their mother, asking her to take no revenge, and declares that he believe his death to have been brought about by some enchantment. No sense of real tragedy similar to that found in Saxo has been retained.

The story ends in Saxo with the death of Hildigeir, but the author of the saga added a string of new events, connected to the previous adventures by the theme of enchantment. When Hálf-dán returns to his mother she tells him that all the slayings that have occurred are the result of *álög* or enchantment put on her by a suitor whom she had rejected. At her instigation Hálf-dán seeks out and slays this character, then collects his relatives' inheritance, marries a lady he meets in the course of this adventure, settles down and names a son after Hildigeir.

Through his use of a variation of the popular *álög* theme, and through his insertions of additional adventures in the saga, the author has diverged quite considerably from his source. A reason for his free adaptation of Saxo's story may be that other forms of the tale were almost certainly unknown in Iceland at the time. The medieval saga *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, which also contains the tale of the fight between the two brothers is only known from two manuscripts, which had both left Iceland by this time. The saga was printed in Sweden in 1722 and at least one copy of this printed version reached Iceland in the nineteenth century,⁹ but it is likely that it was known to only a very few people before it was printed in Carl Christian Rafn's edition of the *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* in 1829–30.

The author of *Starkaðar saga* was in a quite different position. This hero was well-known in Iceland through the medieval accounts of his deeds, in particular in *Gautreks saga* and *Heimskringla*. The author was

⁹ *Saugu Ásmundar er kalladur er Kappabani*, ed. Johannes F. Peringskiöld, Stockholm, 1722. It was copied by Gísli Konráðsson in about 1820 (Lbs. 1341 4to).

therefore able to take fewer liberties in composing his saga, but could use the lengthy account in Saxo to supplement the Icelandic sources. Several summaries of Starkaður's history survive, which are based on the Icelandic material, or on Saxo, or on a combination of the two, and it is not surprising that the different accounts were finally amalgamated into a complete saga. This was presumably done before 1760 as *Starkaðar saga* seems to have been known to the author of *Brávalla rímur*, which were composed at this time.¹⁰ As the saga contains translations of the verses found in Saxo, the author cannot have used Vedel's translation, and must therefore have had access either to Schousbølle's 1752 translation or to a Latin edition. Some thirty manuscripts of the saga, dating from the late eighteenth century onwards survive, which indicates that it was fairly popular. There are also at least two late nineteenth and early twentieth century manuscripts which contain an expanded version of the saga, in which the additional material has been taken mainly from *Gautreks saga* (Lbs. 1492 4to and Lbs. 3891 4to). The version printed in Winnipeg in 1911 belongs to this latter group.¹¹

The subject-matter of this saga has little intrinsic interest as it consists of very little that is not derived from the medieval sources, and what additional material there is comprises mainly of fights with vikings and similar stock episodes. However, the material has been welded together very competently, and minor alterations have been made in the order of events where this has been required to ensure the smooth flow of the story. Apart from the opening, which is derived from *Gautreks saga*, the pattern of events has generally followed Saxo. Those episodes which occur both in Saxo and in the Icelandic sources have been combined as far as possible, but where the divergence is too great to have made this possible, the author has usually preferred to follow Saxo, as for example in recounting the death of King Huglaður (in *Heimskringla* Hugleikr) at the hands of Haki and Hagbarður. Every incident from Saxo that concerns Starkaður has been retained, though with minor changes where these were required, but the other tales with which Saxo intersperses his account of Starkaður have been omitted. Gísli Konráðsson, who used

¹⁰ *Brávallarímur eftir Árna Böðvarsson*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson, Reykjavík 1965 (Rit Rímnafélagssins viii), cxcix–ccv. An account of some of the manuscripts of *Starkaðar saga* is also given.

¹¹ *Sagan af Starkaði Stórvirkssyni*. Prentuð eftir gömlu handriti. Winnipeg (Kostnaðarmaður N. Ottoson bóksali), 1911.

the longer redaction of the saga, reworked these episodes into his retelling of this part of *Gesta Danorum*.

The battle of Brávellir figures prominently in the saga. Again this is not surprising as it is referred to a number of times in Icelandic literature as well as by Saxo, and the sources agree that Starkaður was present. The account in the saga is to a large extent derived from *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*.¹² The author even included a detailed diagram of the manner in which the opposing armies were arranged, and this was reproduced in a number of the older manuscripts.

The large number of verses contained in the saga have been attributed to a poet who lived in the north-west of Iceland, the minister Gunnar Pálsson (1714–91). He was a well-known poet who composed in Latin as well as Icelandic.¹³ It is therefore likely that he was the author, and he may have worked from a Latin edition of *Gesta Danorum*.

It appears that the verses were composed before the prose saga was written. Two candidates have been named as the author of the saga. The first of these, named in several manuscripts, and in Gísli Konráðsson's translation of *Gesta Danorum*, is Halldór Jakobsson (1735–1810), the *sýslumaður* in Strandasýsla, also in the north-west of Iceland. Although it would have been possible for him to have written the saga before about 1760 when *Brávallarímur* were composed, it is not very likely that he was the author. A copy of the saga in his own hand exists (Lbs. 955 4to), which was written in his old age. This is of poor quality compared to other older manuscripts of the saga and it is unlikely to be a copy of a work he himself had composed in his youth. Furthermore, it lacks some of the verses, and it is unlikely that he would have omitted these if he himself were the author and had based his saga partly upon them.

Guðbrandur Vigfússon names as the author of *Starkaðar saga* the minister Snorri Björnsson of Húsafell in the west of Iceland (1710–1803).¹⁴ It may be of relevance that many of those associated with composing or copying the works based on Saxo lived in the west of Iceland.

A final indication of the popularity of tales concerning Starkaður is that another saga was composed about his grandfather, Starkaður Álu-

¹² *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 3 vols., Reykjavík 1943–44, I, 124–32.

¹³ *Íslenzkar æviskrár*, ed. Páll Eggert Ólason et al., 6 vols., Reykjavík 1948–76, II, 205.

¹⁴ *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Oxford 1878, 2 vols., I, lxiv.

drengur, to whom there are references in *Gautreks saga* and *Hervarar saga*. The three manuscripts that contain this saga are all very late, but in the oldest (Lbs. 1504 4to) it is said that this is a copy of a manuscript lent to the writer by Gísli Konráðsson many years before. It would therefore appear to have been composed not later than the middle of the nineteenth century. There are also two twentieth-century manuscripts of the saga (Lbs. 2081 8vo and Lbs. 2500 8vo), both of which are apparently derived from the earlier one. The second of these two manuscripts must be among the youngest of all Icelandic saga manuscripts, as it was written in 1930, apparently for the personal satisfaction of the scribe. He did not follow his source closely, as he states himself.

Most of the remaining works derived from Saxo comprise a single group as they can be traced to, or connected with a single manuscript, most of which was copied by the Breiðafjörður farmer Magnús Jónsson from Tjaldanes (1835–1922), but which itself disappeared at some time in the mid-nineteenth century. Magnús copied some of these sagas more than once and some of these copies were incorporated in his twenty-volume *Fornmannasögur Norðurlanda* (Lbs. 1491–1510 4to, 1880–1905).

These sagas again appear to have originated in the north-west of Iceland, for in two of his prologues (Lbs. 1492 4to and 1505 4to) Magnús says that he acquired the book in which they were contained many years previously, on loan through an intermediary on Flatey from Birget Jónsdóttir who lived on Hergilsey but was originally from 'Sellátrum vestra'. Although the book was in poor condition when he obtained it he believed it to have been written in the early nineteenth century. He was much impressed by the contents, and after he had returned it to Flatey he attempted on several occasions to borrow it again, but always unsuccessfully. Magnús recognised that the sagas contained traditional heroic material although he did not think that they were themselves very old.¹⁵ He did not recognise their provenance, for in spite of his acquaintance with Gísli Konráðsson he appears to have had no knowledge of Saxo. Most of the sagas were new to him, and also to his intermediary, a minister's wife on Flatey, called Guðrún Oddsdóttir, who, according to Magnús, was well-versed in saga literature.

¹⁵ See Formáli to Lbs. 1493 4to.

Gísli Konráðsson very probably had access to this book of Birget's at some time, which is not surprising as he went to live on Flatey in 1852. He in fact owned a copy of one of the sagas, that of Haki and Hagbarður, as Magnús tells us, and he composed *rimur* on the subject. His translation of Saxo contains some of the verses also found in the sagas in Birgeta's book, and some of his references to 'norrænar heimildir' clearly refer to the same sagas.

According to Magnús the sagas contained in the Birget's book concerned the heroes Þorkell aðalfari (Thorkillus), Haddingi Harðgreiparfóstri (Hadingus), Fróði frækni, Fróði Friðleifsson, Haki and Hagbarður, Helgi Hundingsbani (the saga is derived from the Eddic poems), a saga of Haraldur hilditönn and Brávallabardagi (of which no copy exists), and two popular medieval romances, *Drauma-Jóns saga* and *Sigurðar saga þögla*.

All but one of the sagas derived from Saxo in this book concern heroes who were well-known in Icelandic tradition. The author has been very free with his material and it provided only the bare bones of his stories, which he padded out generously with the kind of adventures common in the late sagas. Nearly all of the relevant material in Saxo has been utilised in some manner, except in the saga of Þorkell aðalfari, but it has often been changed drastically, sometimes in the interest of the author's more complex plots, and because of his desire to retain some kind of unity of character he has at times attributed adventures to other heroes than the ones named in Saxo. At other times the changes seem to have been made purely for reasons of personal taste. These sagas are all very long because of the large number of adventures they contain and they needed some such treatment in order to retain their cohesiveness.

The author clearly worked from a version of Saxo that was not Vedel's translation, as he included the verses. It is likely that he knew Schousbølle's translation, which means that the sagas were not composed earlier than the mid-eighteenth century. However, in two cases he may also have been acquainted with earlier sagas based on the same events in Saxo.

Many of the typical features of the post-medieval Icelandic sagas may be seen in the first work in Birget's book, *Sagan af Þorkeli aðalfara*. Although the same pattern is followed in the saga as in Saxo, the major characters are given a full introduction and the motivation for the voy-

age to the north is quite different. Þorkell is an aristocrat who goes on a quest for his missing uncles. On the way he acquires his foster-brother, Gormur, who remains throughout the saga in a subordinate position to the main hero, Þorkell. He is called Gormur inn gamli in Icelandic sources from the 1695 retelling onwards, but he is not named this in the saga from Birget's book, nor is he envisaged as old in the saga.

Þorkell has been given a magic weapon by his father at the start of the voyage, a weapon that seems to be derived from a combination of the magic weapon in *Sturlaug's saga starfsama* and the magic arrows in *Örvar-Odds saga*.¹⁶ This stands them in good stead as they make their voyage north, undergoing perils in storms and in the various otherwordly kingdoms that they visit. More foster-brothers are acquired on the way. Finally they arrive at their destination. They are ferried across the river dividing this country from other lands by a ferryman who bears a close resemblance to the ferryman in the earlier *Sagan af Gorm kónginum gamla*. This may have been known to the author of the saga in Birget's book.

Geirröður is not mentioned at all in this saga, but the villain is instead a King Svartur of Dumbshaf. Guðmundur is the name of a henchman of his, and not an independent king as in Saxo and in the earlier saga. Svartur has two daughters, who are most probably based on the two daughters of Geirröður mentioned in the *Snorra Edda* and in the seventeenth-century saga. They are priestesses and are slain along with Svartur, Guðmundur and various other villains. The uncles are rescued and the heroes return home. No mention is made of the second voyage of Þorkell to Útgarðaloki, nor does the saga contain any material related to the popular medieval *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*, which contains a lengthy episode related to Saxo's story of the journey to Guðmundur and Geirröður.

It seems unlikely that the author based his saga only on the earlier *Sagan af Gorm kónginum gamla*, even though he introduces no material contained in Saxo but not in this saga, because he must have had access to a version of Saxo when he was composing his other sagas. However, in the case of another saga in Birget's book, that of *Haki and Hag-*

¹⁶ *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 3 vols., Reykjavík 1943-44, I, 293, II, 334.

barður (Lbs. 1494 4to, 457–554, Lbs. 1506 4to, 405–502), the author may again have used an earlier Icelandic work based on Saxo.

Although the only prose saga on these two heroes is the saga copied by Magnús, the story is also known through *rímur*. The earliest of these (in Lbs. 2463 4to) were composed by Jón Espólín (1796–1836). These are based on Saxo but additional material has been taken from *Ynglinga saga*. These *rímur* contain a few of the usual romantic expansions but they do not deviate to any noteworthy extent from their combined sources.

Some of the minor additions, such as the way in which Jón Espólín makes Haki the eldest of four brothers whom he sends on various forays, are also included in *rímur* begun by the minister Hannes Bjarnason of Ríp (1776–1838). He, however, must have had independent access to *Gesta Danorum* for he includes episodes not mentioned in Espólín's *rímur*, including the involvement of Starkaður in the adventures of Haki and Hagbarður. Hannes' version of events is closer to that of the prose saga, for in both many additional episodes have been included. The *rímur* are probably not based on the prose saga as the latter contains a subplot which does not occur in the *rímur*. These *rímur* were completed by Gísli Konráðsson, who, according to Magnús, owned a copy of a prose saga which was much the same as that Magnús himself copied from Birget's book (Lbs. 1494 4to, Formáli). Gísli added the subplot to his part of the *rímur*. According to Gísli's autobiography (185) he met Hannes in 1837 and they agreed that he should complete the *rímur* which Hannes recited to him. Gísli must have done this shortly afterwards for the complete *rímur* are in a manuscript in his own hand written in about 1840 (Lbs. 536 8vo). There are at least five other copies of these *rímur* which shows that they acquired some popularity.

The story is that Haki is the eldest of four brothers, the sons of King Hámundur of Þrándheimur. He fights with Starkaður and with another hero called Beigaður or Geigaður (both in the Icelandic sources and in Saxo the two versions of the name are used). He also kills the king Hugleikur, an incident that occurs in *Heimskringla*¹⁷ and which is told in Saxo of a different Haki.¹⁸ Hugleikur's sister, Bera, wishes to avenge his death on Haki and his brothers, and therefore marries the king Sig-

¹⁷ *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 3 vols., Reykjavík 1941–51 (Íslenzk fornrit 26–28), I, 42–43.

¹⁸ *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, I, 1549–32.

arr, the father of Signý, with whom Haki's brother Hagbarður is in love. This requires a compression of the time scale of *Heimskringla*, and in Jón Espólín's rímur there are in fact two women called Bera, a mother and a daughter, and the daughter marries Sigarr.

Hagbarður and Signý are betrothed, but at Bera's instigation, Signý's kinsfolk attack and kill Hagbarður's relatives. Hagbarður then kills her brothers, as he does in Saxo but without this additional cause.

In Saxo Hagbarður comes to visit Signý dressed as a woman warrior, but this was a little too much for the Icelandic writers who have him coming dressed simply as an ordinary woman. An old woman named Gunnvör who is a friend of Bera's suspects him when she sees his hands (a motif that could not be plausible if he were a female warrior). She betrays him and after a fight he is taken by his enemies. Signý has previously made a pact with Hagbarður that neither would live longer than the other. As he is about to be hanged, she and her companions set their chamber alight and hang themselves so that they both die together.

This is very much a retelling of Saxo except that one incident has been omitted. In Saxo Hagbarður asks when he is led to the gallows that his cloak should be hanged before he is, and his enemies comply with this. This is in order to see whether Signý will keep her word, and he dies happy when he sees the flames from her chamber. In the Icelandic versions no such test of Signý's faithfulness is made. The subplot included in the prose saga concerns a son of Sigarr's named Álfgeir, who is in love with Signý's foster-sister. He rescues her from the flames.

Haki then comes to avenge Hagbarður, as in Saxo. Bera and Gunnvör are slain, and Sigarr dies of old age and grief. A rival suitor for Signý who has already been shamed in battle also dies, and Álfgeir remains to rule his father's kingdom. The saga ends with the episode from *Ynglinga saga* in which Haki is wounded in battle. He is placed in a ship on a bed composed of the bodies of his slain enemies. This is set alight and floats out to sea.

In this case, then, the bones of the saga are a combination of the subject-matter found in Saxo with that known from *Ynglinga saga*, and additional characters and events have been added to tie the incidents together and to give the complete saga a more romantic flavour.

The other sagas from Birget's book keep far less closely to their medieval source. None of these is known from elsewhere.

The longest of these is *Sagan af Haddingja Harðgreiparfóstra* (Lbs. 1493 4to, 9–150). Although this hero is not mentioned in medieval Icelandic literature, the author has used the mythological accounts in the *Snorra Edda* and in *Ynglinga saga* to provide an introduction to his story. He then follows Saxo but omits episodes with which the account in Saxo is interspersed so as to concentrate on the major characters. Meanwhile he adds greatly to the number and length of the adventures undergone by the hero. Some of these adventures are loosely based on *Gesta Danorum* but others are of the common stock for late romances. Fights with vikings figure particularly frequently.

After the mythological opening and the events concerning Haddingi's parents, which are based on Saxo, additional information is given to fill out on the hero's childhood. He then goes on a journey in the company of the giantess Harðgreip, who is his foster-mother. She does not become his lover until at a later stage than in Saxo. This occurs after the two have killed a wood-dweller, or *skálabúi* in an episode of a type common in the *Fornaldarsögur*. In the saga Óðinn is introduced at this stage, while in Saxo he does not figure until much later when Haddingi is king. He calls himself Rauður, and gives Haddingi advice in the following episodes.

The episode in which Haddingi is led to the otherworld in Saxo has been changed in the saga, and the woman who leads him there is Harðgreip herself. In Saxo Haddingi is sitting in his hall when the woman appears with an otherworld branch, but in the saga an arm appears through the floor, a motif perhaps taken from *Eyrbyggja saga*.¹⁹ This occurs in a dream, and still in the dream Haddingi questions Harðgreip about the otherworld, and she takes him there. The details of this journey correspond fairly closely to Saxo, though the cock which the woman kills and throws over a wall, after which they hear it singing on the other side, has been transformed into a mere mention of a bird that was sitting on a wall. This was perhaps to make the incident less incomprehensible and it demonstrates the kind of change that is common in these sagas. At the end of the dream Harðgreip appears to Haddingi as ugly and evil, and this serves to introduce the next episode, in which Óðinn warns Haddingi that she will kill him if he does not kill her first. Haddingi is reluctant to do this but he accepts a necklace from Óðinn

¹⁹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Reykjavík 1935 (Íslenzk fornrit IV).

to give to Harðgreip. She wears this at night and is dead by the morning, and Haddingi buries her with great honour.

The saga has diverged quite considerably from Saxo in this episode. In *Gesta Danorum* Harðgreip is slain by her own people after she has woken up a dead man and has cut off a monstrous arm that attacks them in the forest. Both these episodes occur in the saga but there are no repercussions.

After this the author provides a number of battles which are related in *Fornaldarsögur* style and which bear little relation to the corresponding battles in *Gesta Danorum*.

The saga closes like Saxo's tale with an account of the treachery of Haddingi's ambitious daughter and her husband. This is recounted in a more straightforward manner in the saga but, as in Saxo, it fails. Then Haddingi's friend Laðar (Saxo's Lytir) hears false rumours that Haddingi is dead. He slays himself, and when Haddingi hears this he also kills himself, but not as in Saxo by hanging himself. Instead he follows the foreign convention of falling on his sword. His son Fróði then becomes king.

In the case of this story the author appears to have recognised the legendary nature of the subject matter, and has consequently attempted to compose a work similar to the medieval *Fornaldarsögur*. He has omitted Saxo's discursions and parenthetical statements and has altered both the order of events and the contents of the different episodes in order to obtain a logical progression and to retain some unity of character. As a result the saga certainly has an internal logic, but the mystery and glamour of some Saxo's disjointed episodes have been lost. The legendary nature of the subject-matter has been to a large extent disguised by the veneer of romance found in the late sagas.

The final two sagas in Birget's book concern two kings of Saxo's both called Fróði. These sagas are only very loosely based on *Gesta Danorum* as Saxo gives little information about these characters. Both consist mainly of a succession of fights with vikings and opposing kings. *Fróða saga frækna* (Lbs. 1493 4to) is based on a combination of the accounts of Fróði the son of Haddingi and another Fróði, called by Saxo Frotho Vegetus. Both this saga and the other, *Friðfróðasaga* (Lbs. 1505 4to), were apparently known to Gísli Konráðsson, as, though he does not refer to them as 'norrænar heimildir', he makes use of some of the verses they contain in his translation of Saxo.

The sagas derived from Saxo are interesting not for the material they contain, which is nothing new, but for the ways in which the authors allowed themselves varying degrees of liberty in their use of this material. They did not suffer any inhibitions about combining Saxo's accounts with alternative or complementary Icelandic versions, where these existed, and indeed felt free to combine their traditional sources with any other kind of material they had in the interests of producing entertaining sagas. These sagas reflect the changed tastes of the later period, with their spun-out adventures, numerous battles and romantic bias. Although they may seem wearying by modern standards they would have been less so when read aloud, and their audience certainly enjoyed them.

Those sagas which have diverged most from Saxo are those that do not concern heroes well-known to Icelanders through their own literature. Saxo's work was not, generally speaking, given the same status as were the medieval Icelandic works. This can be seen not only in the manner in which the authors felt free to use his accounts as they thought fit if no related Icelandic accounts existed, but also in that, when contradictory versions of events occur in Saxo and in the Icelandic sources, preference was given to the native version.

Saxo's work was apparently never well-known in Iceland. Although it circulated in both early Danish translations and in Latin editions, it may be assumed that only a few people read them. The educated Páll Pálsson of Reykjavík copied the tale of the first voyage of Thorkillus in about 1860 (Lbs. 228 8vo), and knew that it came from Saxo, but he apparently did not have access to the entire work. The energetic Magnús Jónsson, in spite of his knowledge of medieval Icelandic literature, seems to have not even been aware that *Gesta Danorum* existed.

Those who did know Saxo's work were probably mainly men who had had a formal education, often partly abroad. It is of interest that when attempts have been made to trace the authors of these sagas and *rímur*, it often transpires that they were learned men, ministers of religion or government officials. It is known too from other sources, that such men were responsible not only for composing sagas derived from Saxo, but also similar works. This tells us something of the status these sagas had as literary works. (It is also of interest that Gísli Konráðsson did not hesitate to include some of them among the alternative 'norræn-ar heimildir' he cites in his translation of Saxo.)

Some of the changes were doubtless made for aesthetic reasons. The stories told by Saxo are usually anecdotes or series of anecdotes about particular heroes. They do not usually contain details about the childhood of the heroes, nor necessarily about their deaths. The authors of the sagas have provided a suitable background and an introduction about the heroes' families and their youth. Similarly, the endings of the sagas have details about the deaths of the heroes and usually about their descendants. In these they follow normal Icelandic literary conventions. Saxo has no interest in material of this kind and his stories are seldom as structured as are the sagas.

The number of sagas derived from Saxo is small, and as several of them were apparently composed by the same person the number of authors is even smaller. In addition, some sagas have been lost, and others exist only in very few copies. The five preserved in Birgeta's book and copied by Magnús are not known elsewhere and hardly any of the many copies that Magnús says he made have survived. On the other hand, there are some forty manuscripts each of *Starkaðar saga* and *Ambáles saga*, and fourteen of *Sagan af Hálfðáni Barkarsyni*. In addition, these three sagas were printed, in the case of *Ambáles saga* in two cheap Icelandic editions and in a scholarly edition. *Ambáles saga* also serves to demonstrate how many manuscripts of the saga were circulating in Iceland in the late nineteenth century. While Gollancz was preparing his edition he searched diligently for manuscripts of the saga and *rímur*, and even advertised, offering to buy manuscripts.²⁰ This was to no avail and he published what he thought was a complete list of the surviving manuscripts, but in fact a number of other manuscripts were in circulation, and even being copied at this time, which later came into the collections.

Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* was deservedly popular in Iceland as it contained material that could supplement Icelandic sources of Scandinavian history and legend, and also provided new subject-matter similar to that found in the *Fornaldarsögur* which could be reshaped in Iceland and used in order to produce new sagas. Only the literary content of Saxo's work was considered important. The last seven books which are concerned with the history of medieval Denmark rather than with legendary history, were apparently of little concern to Icelanders, and even Gísli Konráðsson did not translate them.

²⁰ *Hamlet in Iceland*, viii, note.

Saxo's long preambles and moral asides are omitted in the Icelandic works. Their authors used only the material that had pure entertainment value. The sagas and *rimur* that were produced may seem to present-day readers often tedious in content and of poor literary quality, but they were obviously the form of entertainment that appealed to their audience. They provide a useful insight into reading matter in addition to the medieval literature which was available to Icelanders and was popular among them during the last three centuries, and show too how one foreign work was adapted in Iceland to conform to the demands of the audience for new sagas.