

The *Sagas of Icelanders* as a Historical Source

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The *Íslendingasögur* (*Sagas of Icelanders*, sometimes called the Icelandic family sagas) are a valuable resource in the study of society and culture in the Viking age. However, for a variety of reasons, one can not depend upon the sagas as historical fact. This article provides an introductory look at using the *Sagas of Icelanders* as a historical source.

The *Sagas of Icelanders* are comprised of about two score longer narratives and a larger number of tales (*þáttur*). The stories are unique among medieval literature in that they focus not on kings or saints or mythological heroes, but rather on the farmers and chieftains who settled Iceland during the Viking age. They're stories about plain folk in the pursuit of honor, while engaged, for the most part, in their normal, everyday activities. Additionally, the stories are unique because they were written in the vernacular, old Icelandic, rather than in Latin.

In the main, the stories are set in Iceland in the 9th through 11th century. This is the period in which Iceland was settled, primarily by Norwegians, and the time in which the Icelanders set up their commonwealth form of government.

Some of the stories focus on a single individual, while others cover a family for generations. The action is dominated by conflict and feud, and ultimately, its resolution. The narrative tends to be complex, with interwoven plot strands that are taken up and dropped until they all come together at the end of the story. The facts are reported clearly and succinctly by a third person narrator, who never speaks to the reader.

The stories were written down in the 13th and 14th century, during and after Iceland's turbulent Sturlunga era. During this time, Iceland's centuries old commonwealth government broke down, leading to Iceland's loss of independence, and submission to the crown of Norway.

What triggered the Icelanders to write down these stories during this period in their history? It's highly likely that these stories had circulated orally for centuries. Perhaps the Icelanders in the time following the tumultuous Sturlunga era wanted to record these stories as a way to look back wistfully to the golden age when their ancestors first settled the land.

Additionally, as the political climate shifted, powerful families may have wanted to justify their ruling status and solidify their land claims by creating a permanent written record of the heroic exploits of the earlier patriarchs of the family.

The origin of the sagas has been argued for decades. Are the sagas simply the written transcription of stories and other oral traditions that had circulated orally for centuries? Or do they represent the work of an author, who took the available sources, both written and oral, and inventively combined them to compose a new creative work? The question has not yet been laid to rest.

It's safe to say the sagas do not represent historical fact. On one hand, many of the characters in the sagas are historical characters attested by historical records. Many of the events in the sagas are known to have occurred. Many of the settings for the sagas are actual places. But on the other hand, it is clear that liberties have been taken by the author for the sake of the story. Supernatural events and heroic feats are described which stretch modern credibility.

Rather than joining this debate about whether the sagas represent fact or fiction, I prefer to take the middle ground. I consider them historical novels. They are literary creations which, in the main, are based on historical individuals and historical events, but which are told by an author more than willing to bend facts to make the story better.

Regardless, it's hard not to be a romantic when visiting sites where saga events took place. Some saga settings have scarcely changed in the intervening centuries and are described in such detail in the stories that one can stand on the site and picture where every person stood, where every man fell in the battle. Kjartanssteinn, the rock on which Bolli hid before ambushing and killing his foster brother Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga* is such a place.

One may ask why this literature was written in Iceland, and not in any of the other northern lands during this period. Iceland was unique in the medieval era in that its population had a large percentage of free, land-owning (and thus wealthy) farmers. These farmers had the means to commission the creation of these works: stories about their families and their communities. Icelanders had a tradition of poetry and story telling. It's clear that hearing the stories told was a favorite leisure time activity in medieval times in medieval Iceland. Thus, the farmers wanted them written down not in unfamiliar Latin, but in their own language: Icelandic.

These farmers had the requisite wealth to commission the written form of these works, the desire to preserve them in permanent form to justify their power and land-ownership, and the wish for the entertainment that the stories provide.

The stories are preserved in the form of manuscripts on vellum (and on paper beginning in the 16th century). When the printing press was introduced in Iceland, it was reserved solely for works of the church, so the sagas remained as hand copied works. However, inexpensive and easy-to-use paper replaced the expensive vellum that had been used.

The earliest surviving manuscripts do not represent the original copies of the works. There is a gap of about a century between when the first stories were written down and when the first surviving manuscripts were created. All the manuscripts that survive are copies of the original. In many cases, there is evidence that the copies are unfaithful to the original. In some cases, the stories were "improved": edited; condensed; combined; or expanded. In other cases, careless copyists made errors. As a result, there are differences between the same saga as preserved in different manuscripts.

Most of the surviving manuscript books contain multiple family sagas in the same book, usually with other works, such as genealogies, histories, kings' sagas, saints' saga, or other matter.



The church at Þingeyrar in north Iceland, site of the medieval monastery where manuscripts such as *Flateyjarbók* were created.

Perhaps the most elaborate of the surviving manuscript books is *Flateyjarbók*. The book was commissioned by the farmer Jón Hákonarson and was probably written at the monastery at Þingeyrar. It's likely that the manuscript was created by two clerics at the monastery, Jón Þórðarson and Magnús Þórhallsson at the end of the 14th century. The contents were probably copied from as many as forty different earlier manuscripts from the library at Þingeyrar.



A detail from a leaf of *Flateyjarbók*, one of the most beautiful of the Icelandic medieval manuscripts. Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland.

The manuscript is beautifully illuminated and represents the finest surviving example of Icelandic manuscript production. The two scribes spent two years creating the book, and the skin of over one hundred calves was used to create the vellum leaves that make up the book. Thus, the book must surely have been a treasure.

Once inexpensive paper became available, it quickly displaced vellum. Many paper copies were made, and the vellum copies, while still prized as heirlooms, lost their usefulness. Many were probably discarded, or used for other purposes. Vellum leaves have been found that were used as sieves, as insoles of shoes, and as patterns for clothing. A ship load of manuscripts being transported from Iceland to Denmark was lost at sea in 1682; the lost cargo was described as "a load of parchment book rubbish."

During this time, a growing nationalistic fervor in the Scandinavian countries reignited interest in the Icelandic sagas. Scholars combed Iceland during the 17th and 18th century in search of these manuscripts. One of the best known of these scholars was the Icelandic Árni Magnússon. When found, the manuscripts were brought to Denmark (which ruled Iceland at that time) for preservation. Tragically, fire swept through Copenhagen in 1728. While the best manuscripts were saved, many lesser works were lost.

Some of the stories survive in only a single manuscript copy. *Grænlandinga saga*, which tells of the voyages to Vínland, survives only in *Flateyjarbók*. Some of the sagas were

clearly well-loved and well-read and survive in many copies. *Njáls saga* exists in nearly twenty vellum manuscripts, and many more later paper manuscripts.

Today, most of the manuscripts have been repatriated to Iceland for safekeeping at the [Árni Magnússon Institute](#) in Reykjavík. The institute promotes research on medieval Icelandic literature. The manuscripts are available to scholars, and facsimiles of the manuscripts are readily available to all on the [Web](#).

The sagas present serious problems to a student who tries to use them as a historical source. They are separated from the events they depict by centuries. In between the time that the events of the sagas took place and the time they were written down, there were significant changes in the Icelandic culture and society, as well as in the political landscape. Additionally, the stories were written for entertainment. While the big picture painted by the author may be more or less factual, the details are obscured by the mists of time or altered by the author to better suit the story.

Since entertainment was one of the goals of the authors, details that are of significant interest to a modern re-enactor have often been left out of the stories. They weren't important to the plot, or they were well known to the medieval audience and didn't require any further elaboration.

For example, as a re-enactor, I'd like to know more about the ball game (*knattleikr*) described in the sagas so that we could play the [game](#) at our gatherings. While many events take place in the sagas at ball games, they contain no description of the playing equipment, the playing field, or the rules, for the same reason one would not include any of that description in a modern novel in which the characters play, for instance, a game of football. The intended audience is already familiar with the details, and there is rarely a reason to include them to advance the plot.

What the *Sagas of Icelanders* do provide is a description of morals, ethics, and behavior in Viking age Iceland. We can see that when a character engages in a certain set of behaviors, he's highly admired by his peers and praised, and when another character engages in a different set of behaviors, he's reviled and made an outcast. Thus, the sagas provide a unique window onto the culture, society, and behavioral norms of the Viking age.

However, someone trying to use the sagas as a historical reference is treading on very thin ice. Recently, I decided to venture onto that ice in order to learn what is said in the sagas on the topic of historical combat.

There are several groups in the world doing research into the field of Western Martial Arts: the combat techniques used in Europe in the medieval and Renaissance eras. These groups use surviving fight manuals from the period to recreate the martial arts techniques that have been lost in the intervening centuries.

One such group is the [Higgins Armory Sword Guild](#), made up of staff and volunteers at the [Higgins Armory Museum](#) in Worcester, MA, USA. That group focuses on techniques from 16th century German training manuals (*Fechtbücher*). These manuals provide a fairly clear picture of how weapons were used in that era.

Nothing like that survives from the Viking age. If we want to know how Viking age people used their weapons, I believe the best approach is to look at the later fight manuals. They teach very different weapons forms, so the techniques differ significantly from for Viking age techniques. But those techniques didn't spring out of a vacuum, and in all probability, they derived from early techniques for earlier weapons forms. Attempting

to adopt those proven, martially effective techniques from the later manuals to the earlier weapons seems to make the most sense for someone trying to recreate Viking age historical combat.

I was hopeful that searching for factual information in *Saga of Icelanders* on topics related to combat techniques would be more fruitful than on other topics for several reasons. Firstly, combat in 13th century Iceland (when the sagas were written) was probably not significantly different from 11th century combat (when the sagas took place). Archaeological sources suggest that the weapons were similar. Further, it's likely that the 13th century authors and readers of the sagas were very familiar with combat and had, themselves, either seen or participated in an armed conflict.

That is not to say that anachronisms and other inaccuracies did not creep into the stories. However, I felt more comfortable accepting that the combat depicted in the sagas generally represented realistic combat from the Viking age. I believe the medieval reader would not accept unrealistic use of familiar weapons in the stories.

I created a [list](#) of virtually every reference to arms and combat in the *Sagas of Icelanders*. While this list is now complete, distilling the data is still in progress. We've learned a lot in the process. Some of the techniques derived from later manuals seem justified by descriptions in the sagas. Some are not, but neither are they contradicted by the saga material. The research continues. Our current thinking and conclusions on Viking age combat techniques are contained in an article at the [web site](#) in the references at the end of this article.

The *Sagas of Icelanders* represents a valuable resource to the student of Viking age society and culture. While they can not be relied upon as historical fact, they nevertheless provide an incomparable window onto Viking age society and culture that is unique among medieval resources, while remaining an entertaining read to the modern reader.

Selected References:

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