Oliver Nicholson - The Origins and Influences of the Icelandic Sagas

The Icelandic Family Sagas are a marvel of Early-Medieval European literature. To historians and archaeologists, the narratives provide not only an invaluable insight into the character and codes of the age but also (when examining the provenance of the texts) into the composition of early-medieval Northern-European society. The sagas are a result of a confluence of ethnic and cultural influences: the Viking legacy of the old Norse oral storytelling tradition and the burgeoning Celtic written literary and poetic tradition. This is then fused in later sagas (11th-13th century) with Romanic Christian ethics brought over from mainland Europe. The sagas are a cauldron in which some of the most impactful forces in Medieval Europe come into contact, offering historians a window into a cultural shift which forms the basis of European medieval and post-medieval history. Reading and studying the sagas from this perspective can allow us to see European literature in a new light, and lay out the elements which combined to define European culture. In this essay, I will examine one saga in particular, the Laxdæla Saga (1230-1260), and use it as an example to discuss these diverse cultural influences at work.

The story

Written between the 9th and 11th Centuries, the Laxdæla Saga is one of the most popular and influential of the Icelandic family sagas. The sagas are reputed for their poetic retelling of historical events, written in Old Icelandic, a derivative dialect of Old Norse. The sagas often relate genealogical histories of key families in Iceland's early medieval or 'saga' age, whilst also exploring themes of conflict, resolution, faith and culture in a pre-Christian world. However, the Laxdæla Saga is especially intriguing because it straddles a time period around Iceland's conversion to Christianity around the year 1000, therefore it is a fascinating example of the intersection between Pagan Norse and Early Christian cultural values. For this reason, the moral conclusion of Laxdæla is unique to the sagas written before it on account of its 'Christian' ethos.

The saga begins with a lengthy narrative prelude describing the settling of Iceland by an exceptional woman named 'Unnr the Deep-Minded' who arrives with her followers from Norway around A.D 895. We are told about the many lands in which she and her followers settled (many of these places are now named after her), and how she birthed many children and divided her vast lands between them. In the subsequent chapters, Unnr's grandson Olaf the Peacock (whose mother was an Irish princess) returns to Ireland to seek his maternal grandfather. His grandfather Mýrkjartan is the Irish King who upon discovering Olaf to be his grandson, offers him to inherit the Irish crown. Olaf refuses this offer but returns home to Iceland with newfound glory and renown. There he marries and has a son named Kjartan. Olaf also has a half-brother named Þorleikr. Upon the death of their father Höskuldr (son of Unnr), their father honours Olaf and not Þorleikr. Þorleikr takes great offence at this and so in order to resolve the potential conflict between them, Olaf offers to take Þorleikr's son Bolli as a foster child. This is because, in old Icelandic code, "He who raises the child of another is always considered as the lesser of the two". This event concludes the prelude of the saga and introduces the characters who shape Laxdæla's main narrative. The primary story of Laxdæla tells of the love triangle and the resulting conflict between Kjartan, Bolli and an Icelandic woman named 'Guðrún'.

Guðrún is described in exceptional terms as *"the goodliest of women who grew up in Iceland, both as to looks and wits…a woman of state that at that time whatever other women wore in the way of finery of dress was looked upon as children's gewgaws beside hers. She was the most cunning and the fairest spoken of all women, and an open-handed woman withal"*.

This forms a parallel with Kjartan who is described as, *"the goodliest of those who have been born in Iceland. He was striking of countenance and fair of feature, he had the finest eyes of any man, and was light of hue. He had a great deal of hair as fair as silk, falling in curls; he was a big man, and strong, taking after his mother's father Egil, or his uncle Thorolf. Kjartan was better proportioned than any man, so that all wondered who saw him. He was better skilled at arms than most men; he was a deft craftsman, and the best swimmer of all men. In all deeds of strength he was far before others, more gentle than any other man, and so engaging that every child loved him; he was light of heart, and free with his money."*

Guðrún marries twice. She divorces her first husband and the second dies by drowning. Following this Kjartan and Guðrún meet. *A* natural love bond is formed between them of which Bolli (Kjartan's foster brother) is deeply jealous. He is also jealous of the fact that his father Olaf loved Kjartan more than him. Despite this, the two brothers do grow up as close friends *"such that both of them felt something was missing in the other's absence"*.

Chapter 40, around A.D 996, Kjartan and Bolli decide to travel abroad to Norway. Guðrún asks Kjartan to take her with him, but Kjartan refuses, citing that Guðrún has feminine domestic responsibilities she cannot disavow. He asks her to wait for him for three winters. They part with *"Guðrún [saying] she would promise nothing as to that matter, and each was at variance with the other."*

Upon arrival in Norway, Bolli and Kjartan find that the previous pagan ruler has been overthrown by a new King, Olaf Tryggvason, who has converted the country to Christianity. In order to force Iceland to convert, King Olaf imprisons Kjartan as a ransom to force his father to adopt the new faith. It is said that *"Kjartan chose rather to stay with the king than to go to Iceland and preach the faith to them there, and said he could not be contending by force against his own kindred."*

Following Kjartan's imprisonment, Bolli returns home and seizes the opportunity to ask for Guðrún's hand in marriage. Guðrún at first refuses, saying, *"I cannot marry any man whilst I know Kjartan to be still alive."* however she is soon forced by her father to accept the proposal who deems Bolli a worthy match in Kjartan's absence.

Eventually, Iceland does concede and converts to Christianity, and Kjartan is allowed by King Olaf to return home. He discovers Guðrún is already married and instead weds another woman, named Hrefna, to whom he gives a precious headdress he had formerly promised to Guðrún. Later, at a feast, Hrefna's headdress disappears and when Kjartan confronts Bolli and Guðrún about it, Guðrún says,*"And even if it were true someone here was involved in the disappearance of the head-dress, in my opinion they've done nothing but take what rightfully belonged to them"*.

Conflict then ensues between Bolli and Kjartan, eventually resulting in Bolli a band of Guðrún's brothers slaying Kjartan with a band of Guðrún's brothers. Following this, Kjartan's blood-related brother Helgi Harðbeinsson takes revenge by killing Bolli. Subsequently, Guðrún's and Bolli's son, who is also named Bolli, avenges his father by killing Helgi. After this, Guðrún is worried for her own safety and seeks refuge at the dwelling of a priest named Snorri Godi, where she passes the remainder of her days. She re-marries to a man named Thorkell Eyjólfsson, but he also drowns, as did her second husband. Following this, Guðrún takes a fourth and final symbolic marriage to God, becoming the first nun and *"Christian anchoress"* of Iceland, founding a monastery which became the most distinguished in Iceland.

Themes

One of the most interesting themes emerging from the Laxdæla Saga is the treatment of the cultural role of women in Icelandic society. The writing is so empathic and movingly written about the female characters (particularly *Guðrún)* in the saga, that many historians have speculated whether the saga itself was authored by one or more females. At the very least, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the saga could have been written with a female audience in mind, perhaps to be recited around the hearth, as a source of entertainment, shared experience and insight.

Guðrún is by far the most significant character in the saga. Laxdæla is truly her story. What happens to her brings about the drama of the narrative events. Loren Auerbach in her paper

'FEMALE Experience and Authorial Intention in Laxdæla Saga'

suggests that it is because *"the strong, intelligent and potent woman [Guðrún] is forced into a submissive, 'female' role…which unleashes bitterness, anguish, evil and destruction"*. She argues that Kjartan's decision not to bring her with him to Norway implies that she is not deemed capable of fulfilling a typically 'male' role of travelling abroad. This is what triggers the tragic events that follow in the sagas. After all, it was Unnr the Deep-Minded, Kjartan's own ancestor, who travelled abroad, leading a fellowship of men and achieving great success as a crucial Icelandic founder and leader. Throughout the saga, there are strong parallels between the stories of Unnr and Guðrún. Whilst the first is, in the words of Loren Auerbach, able to *"make her own decisions and act on her own initiative in matters of great concern",* she achieves much success and has a strong family legacy. In contrast, Guðrún is consistently denied the ability to determine her own fate. Despite being described as *"the most promising woman birthed in Iceland",* we see her potential squandered and her life driven to misery and ruin by her suppression by men such as Kjartan, Bolli and her father, who neglect her wishes and determine her life. Loren argues that

"From chapter 40, until the end of the saga, we are dealing with the results of this act of suppression. We see Guðrún bitter, angry and frustrated…Whereas she had been described regularly by words such as vitr, 'wise', orlynd, 'generous, open-handed' and málsnjoll, 'eloquent', we see her become petty and hurtful in her bitter frustration; but above all we see the terrible consequences of such an act of suppression: the loss to the community and the terrible price to pay.'

This constitutes evidence supporting the idea that Laxdæla was written for a female audience or from a female perspective. The narrative seems to be constructed with this moral in mind: to depict the dangers of suppressing women in society and preventing them from determining their own fates.

There is also evidence of the female vantage point in the writing style of Laxdæla Saga. As Peter Foote points out, "*Of the characters in the saga it is the women who have outstanding vitality and naturalness . . . By contrast the chief men, Olaf, Kjartan and Bolli Bollison [sic] appear still more wooden"*.
For example, the primary male characters in the saga are described in only stereotypical caricatures of masculine virility, concentrating on their physical appearance, stature and skill at arms. When it comes to the female characters, their physical appearance is often not even noted. For example, *Guðrún*'s mind and moral substance is far more explicitly the focus. Ornamental aspects such as her clothes, hair colour or physical stature are never described. This stands in stark contrast to many other of the Icelandic s in which women are not fundamental actors in the narrative and function either as peripheral ornaments to a male-centred storyline or as objectified and unrealistic pawns in a game played by much more three-dimensional male figures.

The second most important theme in the story is conflict and the varying ways in which conflicts are resolved or amplified by the characters. Throughout the story, we see two competing ethical systems - the Norse Viking method of 'blood feud' and 'vengeance' to resolve conflict or wrongdoing, vs the new Christian value system of 'forgiveness'. The male characters, particularly Bolli and his descendants, and the relatives of Kjartan such as Helgi Harðbeinsson, embody the pagan belief in violent retribution for wrongdoing. Craig R. Davis describes this in his paper on Njal's saga as, *"the negative fatalism of old world order"*. In contrast, *Guðrún's* final decision is to leave the path of revenge behind and become a nun in her old age. This

exemplifies the Christian philosophy of forgiveness and by extension the resolution of conflict through approved democratic power structures such as the Church or in Iceland at the time, the 'Althing' (a supreme national parliament founded in 930 A.D.)

Craig R. Davis argues that Laxdæla Saga espouses the old Norse code of blood feud as only having negative consequences, as shown by the consistent pattern of violence begetting violence in the saga. In contrast, *Guðrún* achieves a lasting peace for herself and also for Iceland.

Celtic and Britannic Influences

The collaboration of these compelling themes in Laxdæla Saga is owed to a mingling of cultural heritages unique to Iceland in the period. These influences also contributed to the singular writing style, adopting elements of Celtic and Gallic poetic tradition and combining them with prose storytelling which arrived from Scandinavia.

When examining the Britannic identity within Laxdæla, the most obvious example are the litany of characters and the geography these characters explore during the story. Much like Laxdæla, Irish poetry is remarkable for its number and strength of female characters. One particular motif are female heroines who "by their vain and unbounded passion for revenge bring death and destruction upon friends as well as foes, but who themselves unharmed live on to a great age" [Alexander Bugge]. In Laxdæla Saga, we see distinct parallels between *Guðrún* and the story of the Irish queen '*Gormflaith'* who through conflict with her former husband brings about a war, *"the battle of Clontarf"*, between many Kings and Chieftains who *"lose their lives"*. Alexander Bugge asserts that this story and other similar Celtic poems were well known in Iceland and could have contributed to the themes of female destiny in Laxdæla Saga.

In Laxdæla Saga, the characters have frequent contact with the British isles, particularly Ireland, and even are closely related to its ruling families. Firstly Unnr the Deep Minded, although she was originally from Norway, set sail for Iceland from Caithness in Scotland and was detained, shipwrecked on the Faroe Islands before completing her journey. In Chapter 12 of the saga, Unnr's son Hoskuld purchases a slave-girl named 'Gilli' from a Russian slave trader, who is mute and does not speak. It is later revealed after the birth of Gilli and Hoskuld's son 'Olaf' (later known as Olaf the Peacock), that Gilli has been pretending to be mute to avoid detection, and that she is actually '*Melkorka*', daughter of King Mýrkjartan of Ireland, who at 15 was kidnapped. Her son Olaf is consequently fluent in Old Irish and later travels to Ireland looking for his grandfather. In this episode there is a depiction of Irish lawmaking proceedings in which local Irish laymen are able to claim ownership of the property on Olaf's ship on account of Irish law on ship standings. When Olaf and King Mýrkjartan eventually meet, it is as a result of him producing his daughter Melkorka's ring which King Mýrkjartan gave to her as a teething present, that the King *"acknowledges Olaf as his kinsman"* and offers him the inheritance of the Irish crown.

There is also much owed to Celtic influence for the stylistic character of the Saga writings, but also distinct tonal differences. Irish storytelling tradition is rich with an elegiac, poetic and dream-like pathos. The style is often vague, suggestive and ephemeral, whereas the Icelandic Sagas, much like the ice, barren and inhospitable landscape, are similarly exact, sparse, economically written, and consistently darker, being more concerned by themes of struggle than by those of romance and fancy. However, Alexander Bugge in his paper "the Origin and Credibility of Laxdæla Saga" asserts that structurally there are key similarities between the two mediums. He argues that *"both have a foothold in history; both begin by giving the hero's ancestry and early life, and verses are introduced in both to serve as historical proofs."*, which we can see in Laxdæla's extensive prologue detailing the genealogical history and and origins of the main characters.

But despite the differences in overall tone, there are some poetic motifs which do remain in the Sagas from Irish poetry. For example the motif of *"mannjafnaor (comparison between men)"*. In this motif, two heroic figures compare their deeds for the audience to judge. In the Sagas we see this in the *"colloquy between the two kings of Norway, Eystein and Sigurd the Jerusalem-farer… where each of the kings puts forth his claims to fame and declares what good he has done."* Bugge asserts that these instances of heroic comparison derive directly from Irish poetic tradition in which the motif was an unmistakable feature of historical heroic tales.

The Britannic influence on the Icelandic Sagas is also evident in the role the isles played in introducing the Icelanders to the Vikings. The Orkney Islands, off the Northeast Scottish archipelago, were a vibrant centre of literary work in the early-medieval period. Since the Viking Settlement of the Northern British Isles in and before 1000 A.D, there was a treasury of writing both in terms of poetry and prose. For one example, *"Bishop Biarni Kolbeinsson (one of Islands' chief bishops), was author the saga of the jarls of Orkney"* [Bugge], and these Norse-style Sagas were known in Iceland and influenced its literature.

Norse and Viking Influences

Nordic culture is perhaps the most profound influence on the formation of the Icelandic Sagas. The heroes of the Sagas are often characterised by Nordic ideals of heroism and honour, their pride resting on the glorification of an *"ancestor oriented kinship"* (Byock) brought by Norse settlers. In his book Fire and Iron (1971) Richard Allen asserts that *"that blood feud is the framework of the sagas"*, the narrative hinge on which the Sagas are structured, whereby conflict is resolved through violent retribution by individuals. Craig R. Davis argues that this formula of *"defensive fatalism [is] implicit in traditional Norse plot-structures"*, part of a Viking philosophy in which " *[a] process of negative and ultimately disastrous eventuality…may be resisted and delayed but must also finally be confronted with the stoic courage and grim dignity that will at least secure the respect of posterity"*. This philosophy is based on a belief that *"the efforts of better and better men to avoid conflict ironically produce increasingly violent consequences, more slowly perhaps, but with greater devastation" - if the friction between families is suppressed under the old system of suit an arbitration at the Althing, the more violent the eruption [will be] when the system fails"*, as described by Loren Auerbach in their paper published by the 'Viking Society for Northern Research'. This distrust of organised systems of lawmaking and preference to the settlement of disputes by individuals is cornerstone of Nordic Early Medieval values and a key element of the cultural logic which produces the Saga narratives.

The transposition of these ideals into Icelandic culture comes from the settlement of Iceland by Norwegian settlers during the Icelandic age of settlement between 874 to 930. But even prior to this, stories, Viking narratives and Eddic poetry was spread to Iceland by seamen sailing along the coast of Norway, a legacy which still persists to this day in the Norwegian valleys (Bugge). There are strong stylistic parallels between Scandinavian literature and the Icelandic Sagas, but the depth of these parallels as an argument for direct influence has been much disputed by academics. Richard Allen (Fire and Iron 1971) observed that the Sagas often closely follow a six part structure in which thematic strands draw conflict and are subsequently resolved, a form he asserts is influenced by the structure of oral Norse heroic poetry. Lars Lönnroth in his paper *'Njals saga: A Critical Introduction'*, investigated this six-part structure further and came to the conclusions that it would be more accurately described as a 6-part, 2 act, *'feud pattern'* unfolding as follows: *"(1) introduction; (2) cause for conflict balance disturbed); (3) first punitive act plus X number of revenge acts leading to the next part; (4) climax (major confrontation) (5) more revenge acts (optional); (6) final settlement (balance restored)"*. In this examination he rejects the notion that the Sagas are a literary interpolation of Norse Oral tradition and rather asserts that Nordic folk tradition is instead the "raw material sought out by the sagawriter". Carol Clover in her 1982 study: 'the Medieval Saga' is yet more cynical in its analysis of Nordic traditional influences, believing it more accurate to state that "the sagas composition… belongs to the general European development of the late 12th and 13th centuries." Although Clover does acknowledge the similarities between *"the overall organization of the saga with the intricate design of skaldic poetry and "Viking" art forms developed during the preliterate ages"*. It is these aspects which I will now explore in more detail. One point of influence on the Sagas are the "Märchen", Norwegian fairy tales told by settlers around the Scandinavian peninsula. Many Sagas include episodes which closely follow motifs derived from Märchen. For example,

"The tale of the later Faroese chief Sigmundr Brestason, who comes as a boy to a lonely Norwegian farm, and is hidden by the wife when the farmer comes home and smells the stranger, is nothing but the Märchen of the Boy at the Giant's Court. The Märchen of Aschen-brödel, who lies idle by the fire, but suddenly rises, bathes, combs and trims his hair, seizes weapons, becomes a great warrior, and finally gains the kingdom and the princess, was a story in great favor with the old Norwegians and Icelanders. Sagas like the

Svarfdoelasaga and the early history of Harald the Fairhaired, who unified Norway, are to a great extent built upon this tale."

Another domain of influence is from Nordic poetry. There are two main types of Old Norse poetry - Eddic and Scaldic. Skaldic poems are typically composed anonymously on one occasion, and are more ornately written and complexly structured than Eddic poems. Eddic poems are narrative poems with dramatic quality, very influential on European literature in terms of verse and meter - using *"many varied examples of terse, stress-based metrical schemes that lack any final rhyme but instead use alliterative devices and strongly-concentrated imagery."* The influence of this form of narrative poetry goes beyond the Icelandic Sagas to modern poetic figures such as J. R. R. Tolkien, Ezra Pound and Jorge Luis Borges.

Both Eddic and Skaldic poetry have clear influence on the Sagas. As well as being a maxim common in Celtic literature, Guðrún is also related to Brynhild of the Eddic songs. On this count, there is a synthesis between the Scandinavian and Celtic influences upon the sagas. For example, although Skaldic poetry originated in the Old Norse world, Skaldic poets sometimes appear in the Sagas and appear to be more often as the "Irish type". *"The scald Kormak, for instance, the Icelandic Catullus, has an Irish name; his eyes are dark, his hair black and curled, his wit and his hot-blooded nature remind one more of the Celt than of the Scandinavian"* (Bugge). Likewise the Saga story of the Icelander Porleifr, who in order to take revenge upon an enemy goes to his court and recites a poem called the *"pokuvisur* or *"mist-song"*, which upon its telling causing his enemies to drop dead - takes influence from the Irish Skaldic poem ""The Colloquy of the Two Sages" [in which] The poet Athirne composed satirical poems against the inhabitants of Leinster so that neither grain nor grass nor leaves would grow.". This story also is closely related to the Celtic mystical belief in the power of poetry to have often *"dark… consequences"*. Therein we see a clear link between the Celtic and Norse influences on the Sagas by way of Skaldic poetry. There Eddic Songs provide a more direct link between the Norse and Icelandic worlds. It can be stated for example that the Viking Saga of Brian is based upon the love story of Helgi and Sigrun from the Eddic Songs, and the Viking Saga of Brian thereafter was the basis of the Viking Saga of Helgi - all of which would have been known in Saga-period Iceland, influencing Saga-form.

Alexander Bugge goes as far as to claim that "Three times has the poetry of the Norwegian-Icelandic race conquered the world: by means of the Eddic songs, the Icelandic sagas, and the writings of Ibsen and Bjornson", promoting the Icelandic Sagas as part of a larger Scandinavian history of popular literature.

However, it can also be argued, that the influence of continental European literary culture on the Icelandic Sagas is overstated and that much of the character of the Saga texts comes from the context of Iceland being an insular, loosely-structured society, atypical in Medieval Europe. Jesse L. Byock in the paper 'Saga Form, Oral Prehistory, and the Icelandic Social Context', argues that *"We have come too far in our understanding of Medieval Iceland- including the balance of native and foreign cultural influences- to continue to contrive analogies with foreign story patterns in order to explain the existence of Icelandic Feud Tales"*. Byock states that although *"The Icelanders, well aware of continental society and literature, wrote sagas about the kings of Norway (konunga sögur), the lives of saints (heilagra manna sögur), and mythic heroes such as Sigurd the Volsung (fornaldar sögur)"*, these stories are about distinctly continental European events; however when it came to telling stories of the goings on on their own Island, because of its unique makeup as a society it required its own unique style of storytelling. Byock attributes much of the uniqueness of this environment to the fact that in Iceland *"Authority did not function in the same way as in a Viking, feudal, or monarchal context"*. There was no King, no government, no military; only one national office of lawmaking, the *lögsögumador*, elected once every 3 years to "to recite a third of the law and to verify legal precedents". But although there were national laws, there was no national apparatus to punish lawbreakers, and therefore most conflicts were settled out of court through 'feuds', in which anyone could participate. There was a complex system of chieftaincies each of which had a retainer of famers, however these frequently switched hands and the acquisition of these titles was ambiguous and easily changeable. It is this "anomalous" environment which suggests to Byock that the Icelandic sagas are far flung from the *"epic tales of chivalry, hagiography… chronicles focused on military ventures, kings and aristocracies, secular and ecclesiastical courts, mythic heroes, and saints"*, dominant in continental European Literature. Byock may be right on this count. There is a great deal to be said for the peculiarity of Iceland's society that cannot be discounted when examining the origin of character of the Sagas. However despite this, the form itself of

narrative-prose style story telling, epic historical writing and use of poetic device has clear traces to these continental mediums and therefore it is perhaps more accurate to state that the Icelandic Sagas represent a clearly singular adaptation of this medium suited to the atypical societal context.

Christian Influences

In the story of Laxdæla Saga, the journey of Guðrún, can itself be interpreted as an extended metaphor of the complex integration of Christian ideology into Icelandic Society. In chapter 33 of the Saga when Guðrún is yet a young woman, she has four dreams : *"I have dreamt many dreams this winter; but four of the dreams do trouble my mind much, and no man has been able to explain them as I like, and yet I ask not for any favourable interpretation of them."*

The wise men 'Gestr Oddleifsson' interprets her dreams to mean that Guðrún will have four marriages to four different husbands, the first of which she will divorce and the next three will die. This prophecy comes true, she divorces her first husband before meeting Kjartan, her next husband drowns, Bolli is slain, and her fourth husband also drowns. After the death of her fourth husband, she goes to live with the Christian priest Snorri Godi and undergoes a final symbolic marriage to God, becoming Iceland's first nun and founding a monastery. Craig R. Davis asserts that the four unhappy ends to four unhappy marriages sets up a pattern of *"sequenced structural redundancy"* which then *"prepares us for the final overturning of the established pattern in her concluding "marriage" to God as Iceland's first nun and anchoress, founder of the most distinguished monastery on the island… God, one might say, turns out to be the only "man" good enough for Gurún, the only one to whom her marriage can be termed an unmitigated success."*

It can be said that the conflict and strife of Guðrún's life, eventually being resolved by a spiritual conversion to Christianity, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the overturning of the traditional order of blood feud and Norse negative fatalism which only brings Iceland suffering, to a Christian value system of devotion to God and primacy of forgiveness rather than vengeance. The eventuality and inevitability of this conversion is described by Eiríkr Magnüsson in his paper 'The Conversion of Iceland to Christianity" as *"Christianity, with a revealed ideal of salvation, of eternal hope, was destined to conquer the heart of man, paganism, with no such ideal to lead and to inspire it, was bound to fall back, and eventually evacuate an untenable position."*

This conflict incurred during Iceland's conversion has real historic founding, it being one of the most turbulent and impactful events in the island's history. The conversion of Iceland has a long and complex history. There were Christian settlers in Ireland as early as the beginning of Iceland's colonisation period (870-930); most of these Christians were of Irish origin, a land which had already been acquainted with Christianity; however *"All the ancient records agree in the statement that Christian settlers or their immediate descendants lapsed from Christianity into heathenism… [and] nothing is left on record to show that there existed any state of religious hostility between pagan and Christian settlers"*. Magnüsson attributes this original peaceful collaboration to a 'mutual interest' during this pioneering period in which survival in Iceland's foreboding landscape was by no means guaranteed. However, the next period of Iceland's conversion was characterised by a series of conversion attempts from Nordic missionaries who oft used violent means in attempt to force conversion. For example, in 996, the missionary Stefnir Thorgilsson, the aegis of Olaf Tryggvasson, King of Norway, arrived in Iceland with a company of "nine men at arms" , who "if he failed to persuade, he would wreck temples and burn idols when and where he got the chance". This and subsequent conversion attempts lead to a widespread hostility towards Christian beliefs, culminating in the Althing in designating Christianity as a crime of "fraen*nda skönn"*, or "family disgrace", under punishment of forfeiture of property and general excommunication from society. But this did not stop the Norwegian King in his attempts to convert Iceland. In the summer of 996 "King Olaf…sent his own court chaplain… to Iceland to convert the people", who also "lead Viking raids upon heathen people". We see a parallel of the violent means used to force conversion upon Iceland in the episode for Laxdæla Saga in which Kjartan is imprisoned by the Norwegian King on his travels as a ransom for his father. This is a dramatic of retelling of real events in which "the [Norwegian] king arbitrarily seized and retained as hostages the sons of four Icelandic chieftains who were among the mightiest lords in each Quarter of the island. All the Icelanders who at this time were at mercy of the king were baptised."

It appears that the inflicting of violence upon the heathens were somewhat successful as on the next conversion mission there are far more recored instances of baptism in Icelandic communities. In subsequent missions, the Christians travelled throughout Iceland and many more people were Christians including those of prominent social standing. Such was the case that at the Althing in 999, a debate was held on the consideration of the faith. In A.D 1000, trusted men of the Norwegian King "Gizur and Hjalti", came to Iceland with seven priests, gathering on their way as many Christian followers as they could find. At first a large-scale battle between Christians and heathens was thought to be inevitable but conflict was eventually avoided by way of a peaceable Althing on the 22nd of June, A.D 1000. The decision however came that the

Christians and heathens could no longer live under one common law and thus "the nation was to be divided: the heathens abiding by their law, the Christians by such laws as they should think it fit to frame henceforth.". This was a rather despairing situation for the heathens as the Christians had the backing of the King of Norway and so far outweighed the heathens in military might. The heathens appealed to their Gods and *"resolved to make a vow to the gods to sacrifice two men out of every Quarter of the land, to the end that they should not allow Christianity to spread over the country*."

The country in a precarious divided situation, the noble Thorgeir rose up to address the people at Iceland's 'rock of law', saying that such divisions would inevitably bring about the total ruin and destruction of Iceland if further conflict was not prevented. He recommend that *"we so equalise matters between them that to either side such concession be made as that we may all have one law and one faith in common. One thing is certain: if we tear up the law, we shall tear up the peace also*." This resolution was agreed, and the law of the land was ascribed as follows:

"1. All men in the land should be Christian; those still unbaptised should be baptised.

2. As to the casting out of children, and eating of horse- flesh, the old law should remain unamended.

3. Those who preferred might sacrifice in secret, but if they were found out, the punishment should be outlawry."

Thus, Magnüsson says *"By this compromise Christianity and paganism changed places; henceforth the former was a recognised national, the latter a tolerated private form of worship."*

The Laxdæla Saga is a superb retelling of this long and hard-come-by religious conversion Iceland went through between when the first settlers arrived in A.D 895 and the land's conversion in A.D 1000. The narrative is book-ended by two exceptionally important women, first Unnr the Deep-Minded, who was responsible for the physical birth of Iceland as a nation, and last *Guðrún* who was responsible for the spiritual birth of Iceland as a Christian land with a unified code of law.

As aptly put by Craig R. Davis, *"The new Christian plot of history, the biblical pattern of eventuality, though introduced to native hagiography and the stories of some founding ancestors, was not deeply or securely internalized in saga prose until the mid-to later thirteenth century, in Laxdæla saga."*

The Influence of The Icelandic Sagas

The Icelandic Sagas chart the transformation of the island nation from a loosely structured network of pagan, agrarian, feuding families, to Christendom's most Westward outpost, with a unified religious identity and an organised system of law. The Sagas bear witness to a change that occurred throughout Europe in which the old world of the dark ages, and its remaining preliterate pagan cultural ideals, were replaced by a a "biblical world-view or Christian value-system" (Davis). Culturally, by the end of the period described in the sagas, Iceland and Europe was a far different place. As Alexander Bugge describes *"Christianity was introduced; the times were more peaceful. Great deeds were now no longer done; men simply told about them. Legal proceedings had come instead of feuds. In such a period the saga could have its rise."*. But despite the cultural shift of the times, the Sagas have had an enduring legacy on literature, and the written and oral tradition of Europe. In the 50 years following the Saga period, the Sagas "became well known in Iceland as well as in Norway" and were written down, preserved for later generations.

For one example of the influence of the Viking Sagas, Bugge points to English Literature of the Middle Ages such as the writings of "Geoffroy of Monmouth, whose Historia Regum Britanniae (which chronicles the lives of the Kings of the Britons) is full of Viking stories". It is believed that the Saga of Brian bears a close resemblance to Brennius and Belinus from Book Three of the 'Historia Regum Britanniae'. In the tale, "*Brennius wishes to shake off the authority of his brother Belinus, and sues for the hand of a daughter of the king of Norway. With the princess and a great host of Norwegians he returns to Britain. They are attacked on the way by the Danish king Guichtlacus, whom the Norwegian princess has long loved. A violent storm comes on, the fleets are scattered, and Guichtlacus lands with his beloved in Northumberland. This tale has been compared with the story of Helgi and his love Sigrun in the Eddic songs"*.

There is a great deal of evidence of the influence of the Icelandic sagas on Scandinavian literature. For example, "both Saxo Grammaticus, the Danish Historian, and Theodoricus, the Norwegian historian, in the late twelfth century quote the Icelanders as authorities," (EINAR ÓL. SVEINSSON). The Sagas were preserved, translated and widely read in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. Sveinsson even argues that during the late middle-ages when Denmark and Sweden in particular were subject to a great deal of Germanic cultural influence and many of its peoples were German speaking, the Icelandic Sagas were a reminder of Scandinavian pride in their shared literary history and were a factor in the maintaining of cultural independence from Continental Europe. The cultivation of these texts as a part of Scandinavian identity is what allowed the Sagas to extend their influence into later centuries in which they influenced the style of modern playwrights such as the Norwegian Henrik Johan Ibsen.

Within Iceland itself, the sagas have been throughly important to the preservation of Icelandic Culture. The Sagas have helped keep the language alive, generated interest in the Island for tourism, and have become an important part of Icelanders' collective historic memory, a picture of the origins of their civilisation. It is a testament to the Sagas' role in shaping Iceland as a highly literate culture that *"Recent research revealed that in Iceland more books are written, published and sold per person per year than anywhere else on the planet."* (Myers).

In another perhaps more universal sense, the Sagas have been significantly important as historical texts, providing a window into the lives of ancient peoples from a mostly pre-literate, pagan past, in a part of the world for which the Sagas as sources are unparalleled resources to historians. Although as historical evidence the Sagas must be acknowledged as dramatic retellings rather than exact historic depictions, what they do provide us is an incite into the cultural and societal ideals of the period and allow us to see how early Icelanders' saw themselves, their land, its peoples, and the history of their young nation. Furthermore, the complex mixture of cultural heritages in the Sagas, charts the journey of early European literature from oral to written form, and is a crucial touchstone for the exploration of the origins of construction of narrative and use of poetic language in the way we are familiar with it today. The literary influence of the Sagas in this sense should not be understated. In the Sagas we see exhibited the use of some very modern narrative techniques: "*They never neglect the events, but people are described as they manifest themselves in the events, through their actions and words. People are described from without as if an intelligent witness were telling the story. The story-teller restrains himself, he takes care not to intrude or to relate too much the thoughts of his characters, he pretends not to have any hand in it at all, pretends to be objective, takes care*

not to point with his finger in order to draw the moral. He presents his work in such a way that the reader or listener can see the drama in his mind's eye." (SVEINSSON). These devices of storytelling are now fundamental to our experience of the dramatic arts and without them the presentation of narrative in the modern sense would be unrecognisable. Sveinsson argues that "*[there are] methods of presenting character which are entirely different from those used by the Greeks or Romans…In all these respects the sagas are the forerunners of Western literature of later times."*

—

The remarkable influence and enduring power of the Icelandic Sagas owes a great deal to its composition of cultural influences which were dawning in Europe at the arrival of the Middle-Ages. Both in style and ethos the Sagas are a living, breathing furnace melding together the Norse and the Britannic and the Christian into narrative tales imbued with the unique character of a wild, unforgiving but spirited and poetic land. Through this synthesis the Sagas became a study of Europe in the breach between the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages. But not only this, the Sagas are a philosophical anatomy of the peoples of this age: how they thought about life and death and fate, and how their world were changing in this crucial period of human history.

Bibliography

Icelandic Saga Database. 2020. *The Laxdale Saga - Icelandic Saga Database*. [online] Available at: <https://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga.en> [Accessed 4 April 2022].
Bugge, Alexander. “The Origin and Credibility of the Icelandic Saga.” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1909, pp. 249–261. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/1832657. Accessed 4 Apr. 2022.

Byock, Jesse L. “Saga Form, Oral Prehistory, and the Icelandic Social Context.” *New Literary History*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1984, pp. 153–173. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/468780. Accessed 4 Apr. 2022.

Myers, Ben. “The Icelandic Sagas: Europe's Most Important Book?” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 3 Oct. 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/oct/03/1.

Free, Laura. *Rewriting Laxdaela Saga, Translating and and Adapting Human Emotion*. 2008, https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/english/documents/innervate/08-09/0809freeburningdesires.pdf.

Time, In Our, et al. “In Our Time, Icelandic Sagas.” *BBC Radio 4 - In Our Time*, BBC, 9 May 2013, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01s8qx9.

Ramirez, Janira. “BBC the Viking Sagas - Youtube.” *BBC 4 - Icelandic Sagas*, 11 May 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taVsvYWp1UU.

Borovsky, Zoe. “Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 112, no. 443, 1999, pp. 6–39. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/541400. Accessed 5 Apr. 2022.

MAGNÚSSON, EIRÍKR. “The Conversion of Iceland to Christianity, A.d. 1000.” *Saga-Book*, vol. 2, 1897, pp. 348–375. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48611510. Accessed 25 Apr. 2022.

Fire and Iron - Richard Allen (1971)

Clover, Carol J. *The Medieval Saga*. Cornell University Press, 1982. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvn1t9s7. Accessed 26 Apr. 2022.

Lars Lönnroth - Njal’s Saga: A Critical Introduction

Sveinsson, Einar ÓL. “The Value of the Icelandic Sagas.” *Saga-Book*, vol. 15, 1957, pp. 1–16. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48612136. Accessed 26 Apr. 2022.