

## Medieval Icelandic Studies

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In the field of medieval Icelandic studies, “the oral tradition” refers to the accumulated and encyclopedic knowledge (both sacred and profane) that was passed on from person to person before and after writing was first introduced into the newly Christianized society of Iceland. This tradition commonly used stories and poetry as a medium, as well as special training in the oratorical art of law.

Iceland, which had previously lain undiscovered in the middle of the North Atlantic, was first settled by people from Scandinavia, Scotland, Ireland, Shetland, the Orkneys, and the Hebrides in the late ninth century, a mixture of pagans and others who had come into contact with Christianity.

The people of Iceland decided to accept Christianity as their official religion in the year 1000, thus providing an opening for a more systematic use of writing and books than before. At first, that writing was used exclusively within the Church, but in the twelfth century it gradually began to involve a broader cultural sphere, documenting historical memory (from the church’s viewpoint), legal texts, and, from around 1200, secular accounts dealing with the kings and earls of Scandinavia and the Orkneys. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, stories about local farmers and chieftains in Iceland began to appear (the sagas). In the thirteenth century, the technique of writing was also used to augment the oral training of poets by providing a written mythological background for the poetic language as well as a means of recording the traditional oral poetry that dealt with the gods and heroes of the Germanic peoples (the Eddas).

All of this is so unique in content and so different in nature from the learned book culture of medieval Europe that it cannot be explained or interpreted except as a literary reflection of an oral tradition, in other words as “orally derived texts” to use John Miles Foley’s expression (1991). It nonetheless lies within the nature of the oral tradition, as in the art of writing, that one can expect some influence, both ideologically and

structurally, to have come from books brought to Iceland from the continent (Clover 1982).

Confirmation of the broad and anonymous social memory reflected in the written texts about when and how the country was first settled towards the end of the ninth century is found in modern archaeology. The same applies to the social memory concerning the settlement of Greenland and the voyages that went from there and Iceland to the New World (called Helluland, Markland, and Vinland in the tradition) around the year 1000. All of this was remembered without the aid of the written word, but the accounts were of course influenced by the active rules and needs of the art of storytelling, which would have shaped the form of presentation. This information could not have been made up or obtained by writers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from any other source than the oral tradition. This underlines the fact that if we wish to make any sense of the extant written documents, we need to try and draw up as clear a picture as possible of the oral tradition that lay behind them. Furthermore, we need to take that tradition into account when reading over these documents.

The most interesting new direction in this field comes when we move away from the old argument about whether and if these texts were based on an oral tradition (Andersson 1964; Danielsson 2002a and 2002b), and simply accept the need to read them as the product and reflection of such a tradition. This enables us to utilise all the knowledge gained from the fieldwork and theoretical discussion about the oral tradition of our own time, practically applying it to the world of these early texts (Clover 1986; Sigurðsson 2002). By using such an approach, we can reach a better understanding of the historical development from the oral stage to that of the written culture (something that was taking place at the same time as our early texts came into being). Indeed, we gain a fuller appreciation of the literary aesthetics of the Eddas and sagas when reading them as orally derived texts. At the same time we gain a better comprehension of how they can be used by us as a reflection of the social reality and historical past of which both the tradition and the later written texts formed a living part.

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