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‘Ek segi,’ ‘vér segjum,’ ‘verðr sagt’

Multiple Authorship in the *Íslendingasögur*

Abstract

Although all of the approximately forty Icelandic family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*) have been transmitted anonymously, scholarly approaches have time and again, and on the basis of various methods, tried to ascribe them to authors. The aim is to legitimize the texts as literary works of art and to contextualize them historically accurately. All these approaches share the assumption of emphatic authorship – a saga, whether as a work of art or a historical resource, is deemed to be the product of a single person, working autonomously and being responsible for form and content, which guarantees the authenticity of the work. This model of the author, which goes back to modernity, attempts to resolve the problem of both origin and transmission of Icelandic sagas in an act of violence: as the existence of the saga as a literary work of art is linked to the achievement of a particular person at a particular point in time, both oral transmission of the texts and the variation between sagas as well as the existence of several versions of an individual saga are not taken into account. The anonymity of the sagas is, however, not down to a coincidence of the history of transmission but obviously based on a conscious decision of those agents involved in their production and transmission. The following chapter will attempt at presenting an alternative approach to the concept of authorship in regarding the anonymity of the sagas and their variation, not as some deficit in relation to identifiable authorship but rather as a generic characteristic of the multiple authorship of these texts. *Njáls saga* will be the central example, but other sagas will be considered as well.

Keywords

Narrative Voice, Narratorial Comments, Anonymous Transmission, Saga Literature, *Njáls saga*

1. Introduction

The *Íslendingasögur* (*Sagas of Icelanders*) are a group of around 40 texts of Old Icelandic saga literature, all of which have been passed down anonymously. Nevertheless – or

* Translated by Alexander Wilson. Quotations for which no other translation is cited have also been translated by Wilson. – The work for this chapter was carried out within the framework of project B5: “Narrative (Self-)reflection in the Icelandic Family Sagas” (first funding phase) and “Kaleidoscopic Narration in the Icelandic Sagas” (second funding phase) of the Collaborative Research Center 1391 *Different Aesthetics*, funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), project no. 405662736.

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precisely because of this – the question of their authorship has repeatedly played an important role in scholarship. In 1953, the Icelandic literary scholar Sigurður Nordal thus wrote about the unknown author of *Njáls saga*:

> Med den omfangsrigeste og stofrigeste af alle Isl. s., *Brennu-Njáls saga* (Njála), kulminerer den islandske kunstprosa og sagadigtningen i det hele taget. Forfatteren af dette mægtige værk er sagalitteraturens Shakespeare, en fribytter, der henter sit stof allevegne fra, udnytter den ældre sagalitteratur som passer ham, stor i sine fortrin som sine fejl, sin styrke og sine svagheder, undertiden ubehersket i sine sympatier og antipatier, konventionel i visse skildringer (Gunnars vikingetog m. m.), glippende i den tilfredsstillende motivering af hovedbegivenheder (Høskulds drab), jagende efter det spænende og effektfulde, baade deri og i visse udskejelser i stil og smag befængt med sin tids svagheder, paa grensen af dekadencen, – men trods alt dette som stilist, skildrer og menneskekender en af alle tiders største.[1]
>
> In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the most voluminous and richest in material of all the *Sagas of Icelanders*, there is the culmination of artistic Icelandic prose and saga poetics in general. The author of this mighty work is the Shakespeare of saga literature, a freebooter who draws his material from everywhere, utilizing older saga literature as suits him; great in his merits and his faults, his strengths and his weaknesses; sometimes unrestrained in his sympathies and antipathies; conventional in certain depictions (Gunnarr's Viking raid, etc.), slipping in the satisfactory motivation of the main events (Høskuldr's murder), and chasing after the exciting and effective, both in this and in certain excesses in style and taste tainted with the weaknesses of his time, bordering on decadence – but despite all this, as a stylist, portraitist, and judge of character, one of the greatest of all time.

Sigurður Nordal was among the first to make the case for regarding the sagas as literary works instead of historical sources for the period of Iceland's settlement. Using the example of *Hrafnkels saga*, Sigurður Nordal showed that the *Sagas of Icelanders* tell of historically verifiable characters and, in part, historically documented events, but that they also contain historically incorrect, unverifiable information and anachronisms, which he saw as proof of their fictionality.[2] He thus concluded that the saga could not be a historical source and was also not intended as such, but rather that it was the work of a literary creative author. In doing so, he set himself apart from the scholarship that regarded the sagas as representations of an unbroken oral tradition from the period of the events to the writing down of the texts. Sigurður Nordal considered the assumption of a 'consciously creative author,' implicitly a male author,[3] to be a prerequisite for the sagas to be examined as literature on the basis of their artistry and aesthetics. Because of his anonymity, the properties deemed necessary for the production of art could be

1 Sigurður Nordal 1953, p. 259.
2 Sigurður Nordal 1958.
3 Scholarship generally assumes male authors, as attested by the personal pronouns used in English and Scandinavian literature. Only a few attempts exist at attributing a saga to a woman, such as e. g. Helga Kress 1980 for *Laxdœla saga*.

projected onto this author; Sigurður Nordal describes the author of *Njáls saga* as an audacious genius who breaks all the artisanal rules of writing in order to translate his perception of the world into language. Despite the explicit comparison with Shakespeare, this description is reminiscent rather of the characterization of the Danish author Adam Oehlenschläger in the history of Scandinavian literature. In his poem *Guldhornene* (‘The Golden Horns’), published in 1803, Oehlenschläger resurrects the prehistoric Golden Horns of Gallehus, stolen from the Copenhagen Kunstkammer in 1802, and uses the poem, which appeals to a poetic-mythical popular sentiment, to herald in Scandinavian national romanticism.[4] Sigurður Nordal, accordingly, is less interested in the actual authorship of the *Sagas of Icelanders*; rather, he interprets them as the beginning of a new literary period in Icelandic literature, and strives to use them – especially *Njáls saga*, as a literary highlight – to establish a national literary myth.

While Sigurður Nordal’s primary aim was to establish the entity of the author as the originator of the sagas, and hence as a literary creator, other approaches attempt to learn more about the author as a real person, as a representative of a certain time and mentality. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson’s introduction to his edition of *Njáls saga* contains a 12-page chapter titled “Leitin að höfundi” (‘The search for the author’), which ends, however, with the rather sober conclusion: “Auðvitað er alveg óvíst, að nafn hans sé nokkursstaður nefnt.”[5] (‘Of course, it is entirely uncertain whether his name is mentioned anywhere.’) Even though Einar Ólafur Sveinsson discusses quite different historical persons as possible authors, he thus resignedly accepts the anonymity of the saga but nonetheless attempts to discover more about the author’s talent (“hæfiliki”) and mentality (“hugarfar”),[6] thereby also searching for his ingenuity and uniqueness. He concludes that, although the unknown author possibly knew neither Latin nor Greek, he was well versed with the history of his own country and also with skaldic poetry, that he had experience of life and insight into human nature, and that he was probably not a clergyman but rather an educated layman with a sense of national pride.[7] The image that Einar Ólafur Sveinsson paints of the author of *Njáls saga* is very different from the one presented by Sigurður Nordal; yet both seem to have imagined its author as similar to one of the saga’s protagonists. While Einar Ólafur Sveinsson was probably thinking of the wise Njáll, the law-speaker and clever strategist, Sigurður Nordal apparently imagined a representative of the younger generation, a mixture of the heroic Gunnarr Hámundarson and his rival Skarpheðinn Njálsson. Although both Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson refer to the text itself, it is nevertheless clear how much they project a certain image of the author: Sigurður Nordal the ingenious founder of Ice-

4 Müller-Wille 2006, p. 132.
5 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. CXII.
6 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. CI for both terms.
7 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. CI.

landic national literature, and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson the trustworthy and righteous narrator of the national past.

While both Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson were primarily interested in understanding the artist and his mentality, more recent scholarship has generally been concerned with the attribution of a saga to certain individuals who all played a central role in the history and politics of Iceland in the 13th century and who hold a genealogical relationship to characters in the respective saga.[8] In this way, the contextualization of the texts is meant to be made possible, as well as their interpretation as historical sources, which do not, however, provide information about the Viking Age but rather about the 13th century as the presumed period of origin for the written sagas, a time of crisis in the Icelandic Middle Ages. As a result, the historical source value of the *Sagas of Icelanders* shifts again into the foreground compared to their literary aesthetics, even if this focus now concerns less the period of the sagas' action than their presumed – and indeed hardly verifiable – time of writing.[9] What all these studies have in common is that they presuppose an emphatic form of authorship – be it as a work of art or as a historical source, a saga is thus the product of an individual, autonomously working person who is responsible for content and form and thus guarantees the authenticity of the work. The strength of the notion of the emphatic author as a prerequisite for viewing literature as art can also be seen in approaches that actually wish to do justice to precisely this entanglement of oral and written transmission. Although Slavica Ranković, under the label of 'distributed authorship,' concerns herself decidedly with the possibility of several entities participating in a work,[10] her approach ultimately aims to unravel this form of multiple authorship in order to be able to assign to individual persons their respective share of the work so that their specific contribution can then be examined more closely.

The model of emphatic authorship attempts to solve the complex problem of the origin and transmission history of the *Íslendingasögur* in an act of violence: as the existence of the saga as a literary work is connected to the activity of a certain person at a certain point in time, the oral tradition of the texts is reduced to as unimportant a role

8 As a rule, this concerns either Snorri Sturluson or members of his widely ramified family, about whom a comparatively good deal is known from historical sources and who played an important role in Icelandic history and politics, especially in the 13th century. Snorri was regarded early on as the author of various texts, such as the *Prose Edda* and *Heimskringla*. The question of whether he also wrote *Egils saga* has been addressed repeatedly; Torfi Tulinius 2004 has most recently dealt with it. Further examples of author attributions are North 2009 and Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir 2015.

9 Callow 2017, pp. 26f., in his essay on the dating of the sagas comes to the sobering conclusion: "Overall the research on origins and dating of the *Íslendingasögur* has been less voluminous since 1985 than it was in the preceding thirty years. There have been no major shifts in the framing of the debate. Opinions, within it, however, remain diverse."

10 Ranković 2007; Ranković / Ranković 2012.

as is their variance and the existence of several versions of a single saga. In this static model, the oral tradition of the texts becomes a nebulous ‘before,’ a primordial literary soup from which the emphatic authors of the 13th century then create their works of art. Variance and versions are the ‘after’ depicted in the stemma, i.e. deviations from the original, which, depending on one’s perspective, are to be evaluated either as errors or as manifestations of reception. Yet it is questionable whether this concept of the emphatic author really does justice to the authorship of the *Sagas of Icelanders*. The anonymity of the sagas is not a coincidence in the history of their transmission, but evidently is based on a conscious decision by those actors who participated in the process of their creation and transmission. While sagas in medieval manuscripts are consistently transmitted without attribution to authors, we find the first attempts at retrospective author attributions only in manuscripts from the end of the 17th century, with the beginning of an antiquarian and, in the broadest sense, a philological preoccupation with the sagas.[11] In this chapter, I would therefore like to attempt an alternative approach to the concept of authorship by recognizing the anonymity of the sagas and their variance not as a deficit for an identifiable authorship but rather as a generic characteristic of these texts. I use *Njáls saga* as a central exemplary text, but will also draw on other sagas.[12]

2. References to ‘Authorship’ in the *Sagas of Icelanders*

In Old Norse – as in the other languages of medieval Europe, according to Anatoly Liberman – there is no noun with the meaning ‘author’ or ‘narrator.’[13] The word *höfundur* (‘author’), used today in Icelandic, occurs only rarely in medieval texts (*hǫfundr*), where it has the meaning ‘juror’ or ‘authority.’[14] Besides this, there is the noun *skáld* (‘poet’), which appears often in narrative texts but which is used exclusively for the composers of skaldic poetry in Old Icelandic.[15] It is only in modern Icelandic that this word has also taken on the meaning ‘composer of belletristic texts.’ In the sagas, the term *skáld* is used for professional skalds – for instance, court poets in the service of a ruler – but not for the composers of single stanzas, which are frequently inserted in the *Sagas of*

11 On this subject, see Glauser 2021, pp. 29 f.

12 I am aware of the contradiction that I am on the one hand criticizing the fact that scholarship projects the concept of emphatic authorship onto the sagas, and that I am on the other hand using the editions produced by this scholarship. It would be more consistent to evidence the diversity of voices that I postulate here on the basis of the transmission of manuscripts. As I hope to demonstrate, however, traces of multiple authorship also survive in the editions beholden to the notion of the emphatic author.

13 Liberman 2019.

14 Glauser 2021, p. 22.

15 Glauser 2021, pp. 27 f.

Icelanders.[16] As can be seen from diverse accounts, the skalds fulfilled all the expectations that we nowadays associate with emphatic authorship. They compete to see who can compose the best stanzas;[17] it is required that they make a claim to originality and innovation; and bad poetry is condemned, as shown by the epithet *skáldaspillir* ('spoiler of skalds'), which was probably given to the skald Eyvindr because he was accused of plagiarism.[18]

The emphatic authorship of skaldic poetry, born of mythical power,[19] stands in contrast to the unmarked authorship of eddic poetry and saga literature, where the "connotations of the mythical origins of authorship" are omitted.[20] Nevertheless, the numerous verbs that occur in the Icelandic sagas to refer to the production and performance of narratives certainly point to the reflection on literary creation, even if they are directed less toward an individual authorial entity but rather focus on the text itself.

The expressions *setja saman* or *setja bók saman* (literally: 'to put together,' 'to compile a book') are probably closest to our modern notion of 'producing a text' in the sense of authorship. They are not evidenced in the *Sagas of Icelanders*, however; they appear in specialized prose and translated literature only, which suggests they are loan translations of the Latin *componere*, referring to the compilation of several individual texts into a larger whole within a manuscript.[21]

For 'writing,' the word *rita*, which etymologically corresponds to the English verb 'to write,' is generally used: *Þar kom þá ok Gilli jarl sem fyrr var ritat*. ("Earl Gilli had come there too, as was written above.")[22] This example from *Njáls saga* is ambiguous, because it refers both to the medial aspect of writing – as opposed to oral storytelling – and to the organization of the text; the fact that Earl Gilli came to a meeting on the Orkneys had already been reported at the beginning of the same chapter. As Kevin Müller has shown, *rita* corresponds to the Latin *scribere* and generally means 'to write down' or 'to copy' a text, even if the meaning 'to compose' is not excluded.[23]

16 Diana Whaley 2005, p. 480, draws attention to the fact that "[p]oetic composition was never, however, a full-time, life long occupation, and though the functionary skalds who served Nordic rulers were well rewarded they also farmed, traded, and fought."

17 The contest between two skalds is recounted in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, among other texts; [Sneglu-Halla þáttr, Flateyjarbók]. Translated as The Tale of Sarcastic Halli.

18 Poole 2012, p. 171.

19 The myth of the mead of poetry – a concoction produced from the spittle of the Æsir and the Vanir that Óðinn gifts to the poets – is narrated in the *Prose Edda*. For the meaning of this myth, see Glauser 2016, pp. 1 f.

20 Müller 1999, p. 148.

21 On *setja saman*, see Weber 1972, p. 192; Müller 2020, p. 127.

22 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 442. Translation: *Njal's Saga*, p. 210.

23 Müller 2018, p. 148; Müller 2020, p. 51.

The verb *skrifa*, borrowed from Middle Low German *schriven*, also means ‘to write’:[24] *Þar var at boði Úlfr Uggason ok hafði ort kvæði um Ólaf Hǫskuldsson ok um sǫgur þær, er skrifaðar váru á eldhúsinu, ok færði hann þar at boðinu.* (“Among the guests was a poet, Ulf Uggason, who had composed a poem about Olaf Hoskuldsson and the tales carved on the wood of the fire-hall which he recited at the feast.”)[25] As in a number of other passages, *skrifa* here is used in the sense ‘to paint,’ ‘to draw,’ ‘to carve.’[26] In this example, *skrifa* emphasizes the medieval aspect of how the narratives used by the skald Úlfr Uggason in a poem (*kvæði*) are recorded. In addition, this example shows that the composition of verse is denoted by a specialized term (*yrkja*, past participle *ort*) and that the composer of this poem is named (Úlfr Uggason), while the narratives he uses (*sǫgur*) are apparently transmitted anonymously. As Gert Kreuzer has shown, there are at least 17 different verbs that refer to the composition of poems or stanzas.[27] While skaldic poetry thus developed a rich vocabulary for artistic production, in the *Sagas of Icelanders*, as elsewhere in Old Icelandic narrative prose, we primarily find formulations that refer to the act of narration, to the structuring and organization of what is narrated, and to the relationship between that which is narrated and the underlying tradition.

By far the most frequently used term in the *Sagas of Icelanders* is *segja frá* (‘say of, say about’): *Nú er at segja frá Hallgerði, at hon sendi mann vestr til Bjarnarfjarðar eptir Brynjólfi frænda sínum, róstu, en hann var illmenni mikit.* (“Now to return [= in the narrative; S.G.] to Hallgerd: she sent a man west to Bjarnarfjord for her kinsman Brynjolf the Brawler, a very bad sort.”)[28] Also derived from the verb *segja* is the term *saga*, which, like the German word *Geschichte*, can mean both ‘narrative’ and ‘notice, statement, report’ or ‘event, incident, process,’ and thus denotes the subject of the narrative.[29]

It is characteristic of the *Sagas of Icelanders* that they only very rarely contain an extradiegetic ‘I’: *Ok lýk ek þar Brennu-Njáls sǫgu.* (“And here I end the saga of the burning of Njal.”)[30] In no single case can this *ek* (‘I’), which often alternates with *vér* (‘we’) in the manuscript transmission,[31] be assigned to an actual historical person. Nonetheless, in texts designed to be heard, as indeed the *Sagas of Icelanders* are, this first-person narrator can be seen as substituting for the voice of the author, since the first-person narrator speaks to the imagined audience as if delivering a recital.[32] Accordingly, the extradiegetic narrator in the example just quoted from *Njáls saga* takes on the position

24 Müller 2020, p. 81.
25 Laxdœla saga, p. 80. Translation: The Saga of the People of Laxardal, p. 40.
26 See the examples in Cleasby / Gudbrand Vigfusson 1874, sub verbo.
27 Kreutzer 1977, pp. 135–148.
28 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 100. Translation: Njal’s Saga, p. 45.
29 See also the examples in Baetke 2006, sub verbo.
30 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 464. Translation: Njal’s Saga, p. 220.
31 Thus also in Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 464, note 1.
32 Glauch 2010.

of an authorial voice, but this is not to conclude that it is the voice of an individual who can be identified by name or be contextualised historically.

Rather than the first-person narrator relatively common to Middle High German texts, there predominates in the *Sagas of Icelanders* a narrative voice dominates who speaks in subjectless sentences, which precludes any personalization as an imagined narrating figure. From this stylistic means results the impression of a very reserved, supposedly objective narrative voice, which is considered characteristic of the *Sagas of Icelanders*.[33] This narrative voice structures the narrative: *Nú er þar til máls at taka* [...] ("To return to [...]").[34] It enables spatial orientation within the narrative: *Nú víkr sǫgunni vestr til Breiðarfjarðardala*. ("Now the setting of this saga shifts west to the valleys of Breidafjord.")[35] In addition, the narrative voice selects what is narrated and about whom: *Þeir Hrútr ok Hǫskuldr kómu þangat til fjárskiptis, ok urðu þeir Ósvífr á þat vel sáttir, ok fóru heim með féit, ok er nú Ósvífur ór sǫgunni*. ("Later, Hrut and Hoskuld came to Osvif to divide the property, and they reached a good settlement on that matter. Hrut and Hoskuld then went home, and Osvif is now out of the saga.")[36] It is thus decided already in chapter 12 (of almost 160 chapters) that the character by the name of Ósvífr no longer plays a role in *Njáls saga*. Even if this does not appear to be an authorial decision taken by the narrating entity itself because of the subjectless phrasing, the narrative voice evidently has knowledge of the further progression of the narrative. As in this example, the subjectless phrasings furthermore have the consequence that the narrative voice gives the impression of organizing the narrative and guiding its reception but does not assume any explicit responsibility for that which is narrated. Instead, this responsibility is usually outsourced to tradition, itself equally anonymous: *ok eigi var sá leikr, at nǫkkur þyrfti við hann at keppa, ok hefir svá verit sagt, at engi væri hans jafningi*. ("and there was no sport in which there was any point in competing with him. It was said that no man was his match.")[37] The narrative voice had already earlier listed a variety of the physical abilities of Gunnarr Hámundarson, one of the main characters of *Njáls saga*. For a final assessment of Gunnarr as an incomparable warrior, the narrative voice refers to tradition, implying that this judgement was passed down and thus constantly retold, from the period of the historical Gunnarr's life until the time of the written *Njáls saga*'s creation in the 13th century.[38] At the same time, however, the narrative voice conceals the fact that an authorial decision is required as to in which situations this tradition is retold and enlisted to authenticate the narrative. In a sense, the narrative voice brings

33 On the style of narration in the *Sagas of Icelanders*, see Sävborg 2017.
34 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 36. Translation: Njal's Saga, p. 16.
35 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 6. Translation: Njal's Saga, p. 2.
36 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 40. Translation: Njal's Saga, p. 18.
37 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 53. Translation: Njal's Saga, p. 24.
38 On the significance of tradition for the literary aesthetic of the *Sagas of Icelanders*, see Gropper 2023.

in tradition as a co-narrator and a bearer of responsibility for the narrative. The idea of authorship in the modern sense, as well as the desire for an identifiable historical individual, thus do not do justice to the concept of authorship in the *Sagas of Icelanders*.[39]

3. Who Narrates the *Sagas of Icelanders*?

Even if the *Sagas of Icelanders* do not contain any explicit statements on authorship, there are, in addition to remarks on the organization of the narrative and the selection of the narrated materials, also references to the analysis of authorship in the sense of responsibility for that which is narrated. It becomes evident here that the narrative voice is not only unmarked, but, moreover, that it does not represent an individual – albeit anonymous – person nor a clearly defined entity that could be referenced extratextually. The subjectless narrative voice, the occasional authorial ‘I’ or ‘we,’ and tradition narrate the saga together and complement each other. As the following passage from *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* (*Star-Oddi’s Dream*) shows, these three entities are able to work together very closely: *Þar kann eigi glöggliga frá at segja, hversu högg fóru með þeim, ok mun ek þar gera skjóta frásögn, þvíat þat er þar frá lyktum at segja, at* [...] (“It is not possible to report exactly how they traded blows, and I will make a long story short, for the outcome of [...]”).[40] All three narrating entities – that is, the voice in the first person singular or plural as the representation of an authorial entity, the narrative voice that withdraws into indeterminacy and formulates without a subject, and the tradition – stand in a complex syntactical relationship to one another: all refer to the same event, and all are involved in the emergence of the narrative by selecting, evaluating, and organizing that which is to be narrated. There is hence a plurality of voices on the extradiegetic level that function together as representations of an authorial force, even if most of the expressions on the process of narration derive from the narrative voice.

The voice in the first person singular or plural, probably most clearly perceived by the audience as an authorial force, rarely appears in the sagas on an extradiegetic level and usually only at the conclusion, as in the above example from *Njáls saga*. The voice of tradition accompanies the narrative voice and supports it by authenticating, and thus to some extent authorizing, that which is narrated. The narrative voice, by contrast, guides the audience through the entire text, structures the narrated material, and aids with orientation in the plot. Yet the narrative voice also relates that which is being narrated from a certain distance, as references to the ‘then’ of the diegesis as compared to the ‘now’ of the narration make clear: *Þaðan hljóp hann* [Kári, S.G.] *með reykinum í gróf*

39 Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson come to a similar conclusion, yet they refer not to *Sagas of Icelanders* but rather to sagas of kings (see Morkinskinna I, p. XV).

40 Stjörnu-Odda draumr, p. 466. Translation: Star-Oddi’s Dream, p. 451.

nǫkkurra ok hvildi sik, ok er þat síðan kǫlluð Káragróf. ("From there he [Kari, S.G.] ran under cover of the smoke to a hollow and rested there, and that place has since been called Karagrof ('Kari's Hollow')")[41] After the home of the eponymous protagonist of the saga, Njáll Þorgeirsson, has been set on fire, his son-in-law Kári manages to escape. The place where he conceals himself is named after him. Events that happen in the saga have consequences that are still visible for the recipients of the written saga, which came into being at least 200 years later. The present condition of the recipients has its origin in the narrated past. This process, which is representative of the distance of the narrative voice from the events reported, becomes even more obvious in *Laxdœla saga: Í þann tíma var þat mikil tízka, at úti var salerni ok eigi alskammt frá bœnum, ok svá var at laugum.* ("At this time it was fashionable to have outdoor toilets some distance from the farmhouse, and such was the case at Laugar.")[42] The narrative voice thus places itself on the side of the audience, narrating from their perspective and their temporal distance. The events narrated are set in the distant past, and the clarifying narrative voice is necessary to be able to understand the conditions at the time. The extent to which the narrative voice feels obliged to the audience and expects to be criticized or corrected by them is also attested by apologetic references to missing sources or gaps in the tradition: *En þó at hér sé sagt frá nǫkkurum atburðum, þá eru hinir þó miklu fleiri, er menn hafa engar sagnir frá.* ("and though a few of the things that happened are told here, there were many more for which men have no stories.")[43]

With regard to authorial agency, however, the voice of public opinion and the voice of tradition differ. While public opinion is an intradiegetic voice on the same level as the characters acting in the story, who can in turn become part of this public opinion, the narrative tradition is an extradiegetic voice on the same level as the narrative voice, which legitimizes its statements through tradition. The anonymous intradiegetic voice of public opinion corresponds to the likewise anonymous voice of tradition on an extradiegetic level. In the sagas, evaluations of events or characters are often expressed in the form of a general assessment: *Ok svá kom, at hann* [Hrappr, S.G.] *slósk á tal við Guðrúnu, svá at margir tǫluðu, at hann myndi fífla hana.* ("As time went on, he [Hrappr, S.G.] began to talk to Gudrun in private, so that many said he was out to seduce her.")[44] The anonymous public of the intradiegetic level observes and judges what takes place between Hrappr and Guðrún, the daughter of his host Guðbrandr. The narrative voice on the extradiegetic level subsequently confirms the rumour by reporting that a member of Guðbrandr's household discovers Hrappr and Guðrún together in a bush some time

41 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 332. Translation: Njal's Saga, p. 157.
42 Laxdœla saga, p. 145. Translation: The Saga of the People of Laxardal, p. 74.
43 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 404. Translation: Njal's Saga, p. 192.
44 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 211. Translation: Njal's Saga, p. 100.

later, engaging in ‘lewd’ behaviour.[45] In scholarship, such references to public opinion have usually been equated to a commentary by the narrative voice.[46] As Rebecca Merkelbach has shown, however, this public opinion is its own voice in its own right within the narrative, complementing the narrative voice and the voices of the characters.[47]

The intradiegetic public opinion represents the social scrutiny to which the characters are exposed. For the most part, the *Sagas of Icelanders* are set in public spaces in the broadest sense, where several characters reside. Every action is observed by an unspecified public and evaluated for possible consequences with regard to social coexistence. The fragility of peaceful coexistence as a central theme of the sagas is also reflected in the numerous legal disputes in which attempts are made to resolve conflicts and restore the social order. The catalysts for such conflicts are usually small conflicts between neighbours at first or provocations that lead to infractions of a person’s or family’s honour and which eventually escalate into protracted feuds. Public opinion detects the danger of a burgeoning conflict, as in the above example of the relationship between Hrappr and Guðrún, which is not sanctioned by her father and which then actually leads to a case of manslaughter and legal consequences.

The extradiegetic narrative tradition, by contrast, is the controlling entity to which the narrative voice is subject and to which it feels responsible. Tradition offers the narrative voice the scope for selection and interpretation of the narrated elements, but this scope is likewise controlled by public opinion – the extratextual public opinion of the audience, which hears and evaluates the narrative and which would not accept a narrative at variance with tradition.

In many cases, however, it proves difficult to discern intradiegetic public opinion from tradition, as this example from *Laxdœla saga* shows: *Þat er flestra manna sǫgn, at Þorleikr ætti lítt við elli at fást, ok þótti þó mikils verðr, meðan hann var uppi. Ok lúkum vér þar sǫgu frá Þorleiki.* (“According to most people, Thorleik was not one to grow old comfortably, but was nevertheless respected as long as he lived. The story of Thorleik ends here.”)[48] Here, several different voices express themselves about the character Þorleikr. The voice of tradition (*flestra manna sǫgn*: “according to most people”) reports his struggle against old age, while the voice of public opinion (*þótti þó mikils verðr*: “but was nevertheless respected”) attests to Þorleikr’s good reputation during his lifetime. The narrative voice then points out that no further mention is made of Þorleikr in the saga.

45 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 211: *Síðan fór Ásvarðr að leita hennar* [Guðrúnar, S.G.] *ok fann þau* [Hrapp ok Guðrúnu, S.G.] *í runni einum liggja bæði saman.* (“Asvard went looking for her [Gudrun, S.G.] and found the two of them [Hrapp and Gudrun, S.G.] lying together in some bushes”; translation: Njal’s Saga, p. 100).

46 See, for example, Lönnroth 1970, pp. 170f.

47 Merkelbach 2019, p. 150.

48 Laxdœla saga, p. 111. Translation: The Saga of the People of Laxardal, p. 56.

The intradiegetic social assessment of public opinion forms the foundation for what is later shared and narrated and thus also forms the foundation for the narrative tradition from which the narrative voice avails itself to create the saga. Public opinion is the place where the inherent narrative logic and the world of lived experience interact: the narrative scope of the narrative voice is controlled by the audience and by tradition.

The narrative voice thus transfers responsibility for the accuracy of the content to public opinion and tradition, while it is the task of the narrative voice to structure and shape this content. This distribution of tasks points to the concept of multiple or heteronomous authorship.[49] It concerns a fluid and flexible concept of authorship in which the actors involved do not strive for a stable text, but in which authorship rather defines the scope within which a story may be told differently, be retold, expanded, or abbreviated.[50] The rules of the game are determined by tradition and public opinion; that is, they are subject to social scrutiny. Yet tradition and public opinion do not guarantee the 'truth' of what is reported in the sense of what is empirically verifiable; rather, they stand for what is accepted in a narrative. A narrative aesthetics is inconceivable without a social sanctioning of the narrative.

Yet the story is also told on the intradiegetic level by the characters themselves. The characters of the *Sagas of Icelanders* often have a very high proportion of speech, so that their voices are very clearly audible in the narrative. In contrast to the impersonally formulated narrative voice, the characters acting in the story speak as clearly marked first-person narrators. To the medieval audience, these figures were known as part of their own story and occasionally also as part of their own familial history. The ambiguity of the word 'saga' is thus reflected, as it can refer both to the content and the form of the narrative. From our modern perspective, historiography and fiction are intermingled in this literary arrangement, from which the longstanding discussion in scholarship about the historical reliability of the sagas was ignited. In the sagas, the stories of these characters generally begin one or two generations before their birth with the founders and relate the reasons that led to the migration of their family from Norway to Iceland. Time and again, interspersed references strengthen the impression of the historical relevance of the narrated events for the implicit audience.[51] The characters of the sagas, especially those who appear in several sagas, presumably also oscillated between 'real' and 'fictional' in the medieval audience's perception, and it is thus that their voices

49 The term 'heteronomous authorship' derives from Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens und Marysa Demoor (Berensmeyer / Buelens / Demoor 2012, p. 14). Aleida Assmann 2012, pp. 67–69, previously introduced the similar concept of 'weak authorship.'

50 This retelling is not specific to Old Norse narration, as argued by Worstbrock 1999.

51 See, for example, Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 363: *Þá váru komnir hǫfðingjar ór ǫllum fjórðungum á landinu, ok hafði aldri þing verit jafnfjǫlmennt áðr, svá at menn mundi.* ("Chieftains had come from all quarters of the land, and there had never been such a crowded Thing as far back as men could remember." Translation: Njal's-Saga, p. 172).

receive special weight and authorial force. This applies in particular to renowned lawspeakers, such as Snorri goði Þorgrímsson or Njáll Þorgeirsson, who left historically verifiable traces in Icelandic history, at least according to the sagas.[52]

Although authorial remarks like *Þau* [Njáll ok Bergþóra, S.G.] *áttu sex bǫrn, dœtr þrjár ok sonu þrjá, ok koma þeir allir við þessa sǫgu síðan* (“They [Njal and Bergthora, S.G.] had six children, three daughters and three sons, and they all play a part in this saga”)[53] imply that the narrative voice exercises a controlling force over the characters of the diegesis, the characters themselves participate in the narration of their own story. They often undertake tasks that would otherwise be assigned to the narrative voice in heterodiegetically narrated texts. Thus, characters often evaluate and characterize other characters:

> Þá rœddi Hǫskuldr til Hrúts: “Hversu lízk þér á mey þessa? Þykki ér eigi fǫgr vera?” Hrútr þagði við. Hǫskuldr innti til annat sinn. Hrútr svaraði þá: “Œrit fǫgr er mær sjá, ok munu margir þess gjalda; en hitt veit ek eigi, hvaðan þjófsaugu eru komin í ættir várar.” Þá reiddisk Hǫskuldr, ok var fátt um með þeim brœðrum nǫkkura hríð.[54]
>
> Then Hoskuld said to Hrut, “How do you like this girl? Don’t you find her beautiful?”
> Hrut was silent. Hoskuld asked again.
> Then Hrut answered, “The girl is very beautiful, and many will pay for that. But what I don’t know is how thiefs eyes have come into our family.”
> Hoskuld was angry at this, and for a while there was coolness between the brothers.

While the narrative voice previously described the beauty of the young Hallgerðr, one of the main female characters in *Njáls saga*, Hallgerðr’s uncle Hrútr takes it upon himself here to point out the girl’s negative aspects to her father Hǫskuldr – as much as to the audience. Hrútr’s remark that many will have to suffer because of Hallgerðr’s beauty, as well as his reference to thieves’ eyes, go far beyond an intrafamilial insult, because they foreshadow central elements of the plot. Her first two husbands are each killed by her foster-father Þjóstólfr after they quarrel with Hallgerðr. In her third marriage to Gunnarr Hámundarson, she comes into conflict with Bergþóra, the wife of her husband’s best friend Njáll. The conflict – which, among other things, involves the theft of supplies as solicited by Hallgerðr – after numerous stages of escalation leads, first, to Gunnarr’s death and then also to the deaths of Njáll and Bergþóra in the subsequent initiative to take vengeance. The entirety of this extensive story is already presaged in Hrútr’s words about his niece and the central kernel of the saga outlined for the audi-

52 Njáll Þorgeirsson is regarded as the founder of the *fimtardómr*, the fifth or highest court in Iceland, which decides transregional conflicts. The importance of this authority plays a central role in *Njáls saga*.

53 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 57. Translation: Njal’s Saga, p. 25.

54 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 7. Translation: Njal’s Saga, p. 2.

ence. In the sagas, such *foreshadowing* often takes place on the intradiegetic level, for instance, in the form of dreams.[55] The characters here act independently of the narratologically superordinate narrative voice and co-narrate their own story by laying out elements of the plot and therefore influencing the structure of the narrative.[56]

This form of independent co-narration by the characters can be very extensive, so that the heterodiegetic narrative voice at times disappears completely for long stretches. When Gunnarr asks his legally educated friend Njáll for advice as to how he can recover his relative Unnr's dowry after her divorce from her husband, Njáll gives him detailed instructions. In direct speech, Njáll not only explains what Gunnarr is to do, but he also describes the expected verbal reactions of the other side and how Gunnarr is to respond to them in turn. During this long monologue, which is nowhere interrupted by the narrative voice, the impression of strategizing is maintained by all the sentences containing either *skalt þú* ("you must") or *hann mun* ("he will").[57] What is unexpected in the description of the plan, however, are the anticipated dialogues between Gunnarr and his opponent Hrútr, which are rendered by Njáll as direct speech:

> "Hann mun spyrja, hvárt þú sér norðlenzkr; þú skalt segja, at þú sér eyfirzkr maðr. Hann mun spyrja, hvárt þar sé allmargir ágætir menn. 'Œrinn hafa þeir klækiskap,' skalt þú segja. 'Er þér kunnigt til Rekyjardals?' mun hann segja. 'Kunnigt er mér um allt Ísland,' skalt þú segja. 'Eru í Reykjardal kappar miklir?' mun hann segja. 'Þjófar eru þar ok illmenni,' skalt þú segja. Þá mun Hrútr hlæja ok þykkja gaman at. [...]"

> "He will ask if you're from the north, and you must say that you're from Eyjafjord. He will ask whether there are many excellent men up there.
> You must say, 'They do a lot of nasty things.'
> 'Are you familiar with Reykjadal?' he will say.
> 'I am familiar with all of Iceland,' you must say.
> 'Are there any mighty heroes in Reykjadal?' he will say.
> 'They're thieves and rogues,' you must say.
> Hrut will laugh and find this great sport. [...]"[58]

Through this lively scenic presentation, Njáll's description of his plan is given the character of an internal narrative, although its first-person narrator is not clearly marked. The monologue is introduced by the narrative voice with an inquit that identifies Njáll

55 One of the most well-known examples for such a dream is found in *Laxdœla saga*: Guðrún's dream portends her four marriages which encompass a great deal of the saga's plot; Laxdœla saga, pp. 88–91; Translation: The Saga of the People of Laxardal, pp. 44 f.

56 On the thus far underappreciated narratological significance of character speech and especially character dialogue, see Phelan 2017, p. 13–19.

57 Brennu-Njáls saga, pp. 59–63. Translation: Njal's Saga, pp. 26 f.

58 Brennu-Njáls saga, pp. 60 f. Translation: Njal's Saga, p. 26.

as the speaker: *Þá þagði Njáll nǫkkura stund ok mælti síðan: ‘Hugsat hefi ek málit, ok mun þat duga.’* (“Njal was silent for a while, and then spoke: ‘I’ve thought the matter over, and this is what will work.’”)[59] This is followed by the plan, which is recognizable as a continuation of Njáll’s direct speech only by the ‘you’ of its address to Gunnarr. Njáll gives Gunnarr instructions whose execution is then reported by the narrative voice in the following chapter, albeit much shorter and with the dialogues in indirect speech – and just detailed enough to indicate that Njáll’s plan was executed correctly. The narrative voice thus bestows the transmission of important details of the plot to one of the characters whom it had previously described as clever and circumspect:

> Hann var lǫgmaðr svá mikill, at engi fannsk hans jafningi, vitr var hann ok forspár, heilráðr ok góðgjarn, ok varð allt at ráði, þat er hann réð mǫnnum, hógværr og drenglyndr, langsýnn ok langminnigr; hann leysti hvers manns vandræði, er á hans fund kom.
>
> He was so well versed in the law [= lawspeaker, S.G.] that he had no equal. He was wise and prophetic, sound of advice and kindly, and whatever course he counselled turned out well. He was modest and noble-spirited, able to see far into the future and remember far into the past, and he solved the problems of whoever turned to him.[60]

If the narrative voice leaves it to Njáll himself to outline his plan, then his authority guarantees that the plan will actually be successful, as is confirmed by the narrative voice in the following chapter. Although Njáll has developed the plan, the monologue does not contain any subjective observations or evaluations, but in the setting of medieval performance, Njáll’s becomes the dominant narrative voice for the audience due to the length of the monologue and takes on the task of narration alone for the entire chapter.

This close interplay between narrative voice and characters is especially clear in the shift from indirect to direct speech: *Hann kvezk hafa siglt til landa þeirra allra, er váru meðal Nóregs ok Garðaríkis – ‘ok svá hefi ek ok siglt til Bjarmalands.’* (“He said he had been to all the lands which lie between Norway and Russia – ‘and I have even sailed to Permia.’”)[61] The narrative voice initially refers to the speech of the character in indirect speech, then transfers the responsibility to the character himself and thus also the authority for what is said. The character is then allowed to tell their story further to a certain extent. The saga is thus narrated through the shift between the impersonally formulated and unmarked narrative voice and the clearly marked first-person statements of the characters.

59 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 59. Translation: Njal’s Saga, p. 26.
60 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 57. Translation: Njal’s Saga, p. 25.
61 Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 75. Translation: Njal’s Saga, p. 32.

That the characters are part of the authorial polyphony of the sagas is evidenced by their awareness of their own narrative worthiness, as here in *Króka-Refs saga*:

> [...] ok at skilnaði mælti Gestr við Ref: "Ef þér verðr eigi útkvámu auðit, þá vil ek, at þú látir skrifa frásögn um ferð þína, því at hún mun nökkurum merkilig þykkja, því at ek hygg, at þú sér annar spekingr mestr í várri ætt. [...]"
>
> When they parted, Gest said, "If it turns out you are not destined to come back to Iceland, I wish that you would have a story written about your journey, because it will seem noteworthy to some people since I think you are the second wise man to appear in our family. [...]"[62]

Gestr wishes for Refr's story to be written down, even if he does not say who should write it down. Refr's story is worth narrating because it corresponds to the taste and the expectations of public opinion which will evaluate this story as *merkilig* ('memorable') and thus as a worthy constituent of the narrative tradition. It is precisely this mandate that the narrative voice then fulfils by narrating Refr's journey to Greenland immediately following Gestr's remark.

An intermediate position between the narrative voice and character speech is taken up in the sagas by stanzas interspersed in the narrative text in various numbers and density, depending on the saga.[63] For the most part, these stanzas are composed in the skaldic meter of *dróttkvætt* ('court metre'); a small number are composed in other skaldic meters, and more rarely in eddic meters. In the *Sagas of Icelanders*, these stanzas, which are very elaborate both syntactically and in their imagery, are mainly spoken by the characters in the saga who use them to express their subjective feeling and judgment in connection with a particular event, such as Móðólfr Ketilsson, who speaks a stanza after Njáll's farm and its inhabitants have been burned down by enemies:

> Þá kvað Móðólfr Ketilsson vísu:
> Stafr lifir einn, þar er inni
> unnfúrs viðir brunnu,
> synir ollu því snjallir
> Sigfúss, Níals húsa.
> Nú er, Gollnis sonr, goldinn,
> gekk eldr of sjǫt rekka,
> ljóss brann hyrr í húsum,
> Hǫskulds bani ins rǫskva.

62 Króka-Refs saga, p. 131. Translation: The Saga of Ref the Sly, p. 404.

63 The *Íslendingasögur* as prosimetrum were the subject of a project funded by the DFG and AHRC: https://uni-tuebingen.de/fakultaeten/philosophische-fakultaet/fachbereiche/neuphilologie/englisches-seminar/sections/skandinavistik/forschung/the-islendingasoegur-as-prosimetrum/ (last accessed: 11 December 2024).

Modolf Ketilsson spoke this verse:
From Njal’s house *one* [= Kari] lived
when fire burned the rest;
the sons of Sigfus,
stalwart men, set it.
Now the *kin of Gollnir* [= Njal] is paid
for the killing of brave Hoskuld;
the blaze burned through the house,
bright flames in the hall.[64]

In this stanza, Móðólfr, on the one hand, expresses his satisfaction that the death of one of his allies is now avenged. On the other hand, he also expresses his shock at the cruelty of the *brenna*, in which people are burned alive in their own homes. In the sagas, emotions are generally mentioned explicitly by the narrative voice only when they are publicly displayed by the characters, that is, when they can be seen by others. This is often a matter of grief over a young man who has been killed or anger induced by an infraction against one’s honour. Such publicly expressed feelings initiate actions and are therefore relevant for the narrative voice. Private feelings, by contrast, are restricted to the interior of the house or to closed rooms and are either expressed there by the characters themselves or have to be deduced interpretively by the audience.[65] With their strictly regulated language and form, clearly delineated from the prose, skaldic stanzas are likewise a kind of closed space in the saga in which a character can speak about their own feelings and thus make their interiority visible. Because of the hermetic language of skaldic poetry, these subjective expressions are, however, not immediately accessible. The setting of these stanzas is often diffuse, both in terms of the spatial location of the characters speaking them and their temporal relationship to the immediately preceding events. Because of the otherwise linear chronology of the saga, the stanzas are indeed implied to be a direct reaction, but they are to a certain extent a hiatus in the diegesis – like a text spoken as an aside in the theatre. They interrupt the narrative flow and force the audience to pause as the meaning of the stanzas does not disclose itself straightaway. They are admittedly statements by a character in the story in direct speech, but their stylized language makes them foreign aesthetic bodies in the prose text. Even if stanzas are occasionally embedded in a character’s longer direct speech, they are usually marked by a formulaic inquit of the narrative voice, as in the example above, and are therefore offset from ‘normal’ character speech.

Stanzas are also quoted by the narrative voice for authentication of the narrative, as here in *Eyrbyggja saga:*

64 Brennu-Njáls saga, pp. 335 f. Translation: Njal’s Saga, pp. 158 f.
65 See Gropper 2020.

Þar fellu þrír menn af Kjalleklingum, en fjórir af Illuga. Styrr Þórgrímsson vá þá tvá menn. Svá segir Oddr í Illugadrápu:

Drótt gekk sýnt á sættir,
svellendr en þar fellu
þremja svells fyr þolli
þrír andvǫku randa;
áðr kynfrǫmuðr kœmi
kvánar hreggs við seggi,
frægt gørðisk þat fyrða
forráð, griðum Snorri.

Three of the Kjalleklings' men were killed and four of Illugi's men. Styr Thorgrimsson killed two men there.
Odd said this about it in his drapa on Illugi:

They openly breached the settlement,
and three *stirrers of wakeful shields* [= warriors]
fell there before *the bearer*
of the ice-sharp blade [= warrior]
until Snorri – the warrior who provides for
the *giant-wife's wolf-kin* [= carrion beasts] –
fixed a settlement between them.
His leadership grew famous.[66]

The anonymous narrative voice attests its statement about the outcome of the battle through the quotation of a named skald who, as an eyewitness to the event and hence a reliable source, has composed a praise poem for one of the combatants. The stanza is extradiegetic, as it is quoted by the narrative voice in such a way that the composer of the stanza supports the narrative voice authorially. From the point of view of the characters, however, the composer of the stanza is closer to them as a contemporary than is the narrative voice, which decidedly presents itself as being temporally distant from the narrated events. As a result, these extradiegetic skaldic stanzas connect the different narrative levels, and thus also the narrative entities. The extradiegetic narrative voice can quote stanzas that are spoken by characters in other narratives on an intradiegetic level. Voices that speak concurrently with the characters in the diegesis complement the narrative voice, which stages itself as temporally different. At the same time, the stanzas complement the anonymous extradiegetic entities of the narrative voice and tradition with an identifiable first-person speaker, which is otherwise delimited almost exclusively to the intradiegetic level.

All of the roughly forty *Sagas of Icelanders* manifest this concept of polyphonic narration, albeit in each case in different forms and with different forms of composition of this

66 Eyrbyggja saga, p. 32. Translation: The Saga of the People of Eyri, p. 144.

polyphony. In some sagas, such as *Reykdœla saga*, the narrative voice is strongly supported by tradition, whereas in *Njáls saga*, intradiegetic public opinion is perceived as a strongly distinct voice. The proportion of character speech also varies greatly from saga to saga. *Reykdœla saga*, for instance, reproduces character speech almost exclusively in indirect speech, while the characters in *Njáls saga*, as shown above, complement the narrative voice. Some sagas, such as *Eyrbyggja saga*, contain a variety of stanzas distributed across the whole narrative, while other sagas, such as *Reykdœla saga*, feature only occasional stanzas or none at all, as in *Hrafnkels saga*. What the entire corpus of the *Sagas of Icelanders* has in common, however, is that a plurality of entities participate in the narrative, both on the extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels, by which first-person speech, with a few exceptions, is delimited to character speech on the intradiegetic level. Extradiegetic and intradiegetic voices complement each other – to some degree like a choir, with individual soloists stepping forward – but do not aim at narrating contradictory stories.

4. The Multiple Authorship of the *Sagas of Icelanders*

Authorship is only weakly marked in the *Sagas of Icelanders*. Any signs of emphatic authorship, such as attribution by name, first-person narrators, or attributive paratexts, are almost entirely absent. Instead, the sagas contain numerous references to polyphonic narration – both on an intradiegetic and extradiegetic level. Each saga is narrated by an array of different voices, which all jointly contribute to the overall narrative. On the extradiegetic level, these are the narrative voice and the tradition, as well as sources cited by the narrative voice. On the intradiegetic level, this is a matter of character speech and public opinion; there are individual voices that express themselves in the speech of characters, but there is also the collective voice of public opinion.[67] As the example of Njáll’s plan has shown, character speech can also be polyphonic to the extent that the character allows several other characters to speak in his own speech.[68]

On the extradiegetic level, a decidedly collective voice evolves with tradition, while the narrative voice oscillates between the individual *ek* (‘I’) and the collective *vér* (‘we’) but is expressed as impersonal most of the time.

We thus find in the saga a form of multi-voiced or polyphonous narration, yet one in which the voices are not orchestrated by the author nor expressive of his intention, as in Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony,[69] but in which all the voices contribute to the creation of the saga and thus possess authorial power themselves. Through the use of these diverse voices, contradictory opinions, gaps in the tradition, or even alternative

67 On the collective narrative voice (narrative entity), see Roggenbuck 2020, p. 87.
68 On polyphonic character speech, see Roggenbuck 2020, p. 109 f.
69 Bakhtin 1984, pp. 220 f.

versions of the narrative are revealed, which accordingly reflects the narrative process itself but does not create the overall impression of unreliable or subversive narration – though this of course does not exclude the possibility of there being subversive actions or speech within the diegesis. These different narrative entities are conscious of their responsibility for selection and interpretation in the act of narration, and therefore reflect the awareness of participating in a form of multiple, collective authorship. The narrative polyphony of the sagas is the product of a "shared" authorship and shows that the sagas are "the work of men, though not the work of a man."[70] The narrative is indeed structured and organized by the narrative voice – which itself oscillates between singular and plural – but the shared perspective of the narrative is determined by tradition.[71]

The collective memory of the community, represented by the voices of tradition and public opinion, is the actual authorial force that defines the scope of the narrative. The fluctuation between the 'I' of character speech, the 'I' / 'we' of the narrative voice, and the 'one' (*svá er sagt*: 'as it is told' or *menn segja*: 'people say') of tradition and public opinion does not produce a contrast between individual or plural narration but represents different perspectives on that which is narrated. The different voices do not undermine an overarching narrative voice but rather complement both the narrative voice and one another, telling the story together by contributing different perspectives, positions, and facets. It is not a question of telling the one true story, but about putting together (*setja saman*) a good story from the available options. The different versions of the narrative are indeed marked, but they are not evaluated as correct or incorrect; rather, they are kept open as various narrative possibilities. The marking of variance reflects the awareness of aesthetic structure: the latitude of the narrating entities consists in how the story is narrated, what is selected, and how it is emphasized.

The point of confluence justifying the multiple authorship of the *Sagas of Icelanders* is the strength of the narrative tradition, the appreciation of which is expressed aesthetically in the staging of a narrative that narrates itself in multiple voices. The polyphony of this narrative interweaves the extradiegetic with the intradiegetic level. Despite the close relationship that the *Sagas of Icelanders* have to oral tradition, they represent oral narration – in the sense of conventional, natural storytelling – only in a limited way; while they indeed narrate the story quite conventionally, that is, in a linear chronological order, they also contain unnatural elements.[72] The sagas transcend the boundaries of narrative communication in that their characters, for example, take on the role of the narrative voice or speak highly artificial stanzas.[73] The similarities with 'natural' practices of oral narration that are nevertheless often present in the sagas are

70 The concept of 'shared authorship' and the quotation are derived from C.S. Lewis 1966, p. 39.
71 See Lotman/O'Toole 1975, p. 342.
72 See the table in Skov Nielsen 2011a, p. 85.
73 For 'unnatural' character speech, see Skov Nielsen 2011b.

not relics that have survived the written formation of the sagas or that shine through their literarily reworked surface; rather, they are part of the aesthetics of a narrative art that is based on the continuous interaction between artistic production and social reception. The transmission of the sagas mirrors a continuous reflection on the negotiations between literary convention and public expectation in a slowly but constantly shifting social context. The formulations frequently appearing in medieval texts that request of anyone who knows better to correct a narrative are not empty truisms in the sagas – as the evidence of alternative versions attests – but rather a program of collective authorship.

The sustainability of this aesthetic of multiple narration can also be seen in the transmission history of the *Sagas of Icelanders*. Numerous sagas, such as *Njáls saga*, for instance, are passed down in different versions, which often circulated simultaneously. The complex stemma of *Njáls saga* shows that numerous manuscripts cannot be assigned clearly to any of the versions.[74] There was thus no ‘correct’ or ‘final version’; rather, the narrative could be varied – within the limits preset by the controlling entities of tradition and public opinion (audience). These versions are the results of a continuous interaction with the audience, a narratively productive give-and-take as a source of power for the appreciation of multiple authorship. The audience of the saga takes on the duties of public opinion and tradition by accepting a saga, finding it worthy of further transmission, and possibly adapting it to a new context and new expectations. While the aspect of inherent logic, with an emphasis on authenticity and autonomy, predominates in the modern conception of authorship, the aesthetics of multiple authorship in the sagas is determined by continuous negotiations between the (re-)producers and recipients of the texts. Innovation and change are possible, but the scope for this is determined and controlled by the tradition – represented in each case by the receiving audience. Authorship does not signify a claim to being the originator of a narrative but rather means the participation in a shared tradition through the realization of a new version of the story.

The *Sagas of Icelanders* are thus flexible narratives for which ‘the single correct’ text of an imagined archetype, for which an author was then sought, was stipulated only with the beginning of philological editing. As a result, philological editions attempted to reduce the polyphony of the *Sagas of Icelanders* to a single, responsible voice, which should be determined by name as far as possible and which, for large sections of the scholarly community, is still today considered a prerequisite for the sagas being appropriate objects for analysis as literature with an artistic claim. Yet even beyond the Middle Ages, the polyphonic narrative style of the saga time and again invited new voices to participate in its narration. For this reason, we should abandon the notion that any *Saga of Icelanders* is a self-contained work, as well as the idea of an individual, identifiable, and nameable authorial entity being solely responsible for it.

74 See the stemma in Lethbridge / Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, plate 12.

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